

A/N Full Summary: AU. On that fateful night, Neville Longbottom was the child that You-Kno-Who marked as his equal. Surprisingly, or unsurprisingly, Longbottom lived through He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's Killing curse. Fourteen years later, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived-But-Not-Like-That, is caught in the middle of not only the War against You-Know-Who but a war against himself as he fights to assimilate himself as a key player in the battle against You-Know-Who. While he knows that Neville Longbottom is the leader, he can't help himself when he falls for his sidekick, Hermione Granger.

"I can't believe you."

"Try me," Dean Thomas said with a smirk that Draco Malfoy would applaud.

"You actually convinced Filch that you just had Butterbeer?" Harry Potter asked him insistently.

"Not only did I manage to convince him it was just Butterbeer, that stupid cat also bit her owner's ankle so I could make a quick escape," Dean said smugly.

Harry stood up and applauded slowly, shaking his head at his friend's marvelous escape. Seamus got to his knees and started praising him as if was some Incan God. Harry postured that his friend's actions were more likely due to the Firewhiskey that Dean had managed to sneak inside the dorms. Harry laughed at Seamus as he took another sip of the drink that always managed to burn his throat for the next couple hours or so.

"Of course that wasn't the only trouble I ran into on the way over here," Dean said as he took a gulp of his drink.

"Oh yeah, what else?" Seamus drunkenly replied.

"Ran into the Trio too. Good thing they were in a bit of rush because Granger would have bit my head off if she saw what I was carrying," Dean said.

Seamus nodded solemnly and raised his drink, "Three cheers for Dean Thomas."

"Where were they headed?" Harry asked curiously, tracing the mouth of his bottle with a pinky.

"Oh, who knows, off saving the world again of course," Dean shrugged.

"Maybe Longbottom was the one skiving drinks from Rosmerta. He is the Boy-Who-Lived," Seamus suggested.

"Like that'll be the day, Longbottom would rather die than do something dishonorable," Dean snorted.

"Lay off him Dean, unless you want to be the Boy-Who-Lived," Harry smirked at him. Dean responded by etching a temporary lightning bolt onto his forehead and pretending to stare solemnly at Seamus.

"The world is on my shoulders."

Seamus and Harry laughed in response, Seamus almost falling off the bed due to the incredible hilarity that he somehow perceived from Dean's imitation.

"But no, I wouldn't want to be the Boy-Who-Lived. I'd have to deal with Granger then," Dean reasoned.

"Oh, she's not too terrible," Harry defended her.

"Speak for yourself Potter, one time, she...she...she..." Seamus stuttered.

"She?" Harry asked.

"She wrote me a note!" Seamus exclaimed.

"What'd the note say Seamus. Please. Tell me," Dean egged him on.

"She told me if she caught me with my hand up another girl's jumper then she'd have me hauled off straight to Snape's!" Seamus finished with a salute to the dressers.

"It's just her job. Well, mine too really," Harry reasoned with his increasingly drunk friend.

"Ahhhhh....well, you're not as uppity uppity as she is. Good thing you're the other Prefect Harry. Don't know what we would do without ya," Seamus slung an arm around Harry's shoulder and burped directly into his face.

"I don't know what I'd do without you either Seamus."

"Really though Harry, there's no need to defend Granger all the time," Dean said again.

"Oh come off it Dean, you're just mad she actually reported you when you tried to bring the Whiskey in the last time and you, however brave it may be, actually had the balls to try to blackmail her," Harry scoffed as he had another gulp of his own drink.

"Right bitchy that was! Can't she give a housemate a pass just once!" Dean exasperated blew a dreadlock near his mouth.

"No favorites with her," Harry replied.

"Except for Saintly Longbottom," Seamus saluted the mirror now.

"Yeah! She never gets him in trouble!" Dean said. When Harry didn't respond, Dean just grinned smugly at him. Harry could only manage a shrug after a few moments.

"He is the Boy-Who-Lived. You have to have some privileges for that," Harry reasoned with another shrug.

"A toast to that!" Seamus was curiously staring at a pillow.

"Shut up Seamus, you're getting annoying and yeah I guess you have to have some perks to being the conqueror after all. I mean it's a good thing he didn't participate in that Goblet of Fire tournament last year though. He would have even gotten more fan than he does now," Dean said.

"We can sit here all we want guys, but the fact of the matter is that there isn't anything wrong with Longbottom. At least he isn't like that prick Malfoy," Dean and Seamus both nodded at Harry's statement.

"Ha! Well Malfoy can suck my-"

"SEAMUS FINNEGAN!" a shriek from outside their door.

"Shit, shit, shit..." Dean was grumbling as he hastily stashed away whatever contraband was in view.

"Harry, get that one,"

"I got it already."

"That one too."

"Dean shut up."

"Ahem," Hermione Granger was standing in the 5th year Boy's dorms with her hands on her hips, looking as if the hell of fury had come to collect its victims.

"G'day Hermione, how are you on this splendid evening?" Dean asked with a wide grin on his face.

Hermione didn't respond for a second. Curiously enough, Hermione started sniffing, her nose crunching up in various forms. Harry thought it was rather cute. It was not cute, however, when Hermione narrowed her eyes at the three of them as she finally stopped sniffing.

"Dean Thomas..."

"Hermione, I can explain..."

"Wait a second, Harry" she said calmly to him. Dean glared at Harry and Harry could only shrug back.

"What have I told you about sneaking FIREWHISKEY into Hogwarts!" she yelled at the boy with dreads.

"I have....no idea...what you're talking about," Dean said slowly, trying to convince Hermione through positive reinforcement with not so subtle nods.

"I can smell it Thomas, so do not even think about denying it," Hermione narrowed her eyes even more if possible.

"There's nothing to deny, no Firewhiskey here," Dean continued.

"Open your mouth."

"That's what she said," snickered Seamus.

"SEAMUS SHUT UP!" Harry and Dean yelled in unison. Hermione turned her patronizing glare towards the Irish boy. Her bushy hair seemed to be sizzling on edge and Harry could make out her jaw clenching furiously as she debated what to do with the three obviously guilty boys.

So hot.

Harry smacked himself in his head.

"Harry?" Hermione said with a worried look on her face.

"Thought I saw a fly, poor hand-eye coordination and all," Harry pointed at his glasses.

Seamus scoffed, "If you had poor hand-eye coordination then we wouldn't be competing for the cup again now would we?"

"Yeah, you're the best Gryffindor Seeker in centuries Harry," Dean said.

"It's a lot smaller than Snitch."

"That's what she said."

Dean, Hermione, and Harry only stared at Seamus. Seamus, oblivious to their tired looks, continued to snicker to himself.

"I honestly wish I hadn't taught him that joke," Dean grumbled.

"And I honestly wish that you would stop skiving off to Hogsmeade to get Firewhiskey Dean," Hermione huffed. Dean was about to open his mouth to retort, but Harry spoke before him.

"Hermione, it won't happen again, you can trust me," Harry explained as he stood up from the bed and rubbed the back of his

neck nervously. Hermione continued to glare at Dean and Seamus but softened her stare when she turned to Harry.

"At least there's one of you up here with some common sense," Hermione smiled at Harry. Harry started violently coughing.

"Harry, are you alright there?" Ronald Weasley asked as he entered the dorm room. Neville Longbottom, also known as the Boy-Who-Lived, came in right behind him.

"Completely fine!" Harry raised a hand to stop any advancements to help him, "Just something in my throat really."

"That's what-"

Seamus could never finish his sentence as Dean grabbed a pillow and immediately started whacking him viciously with the feathery object.

"Shut – up – already," Dean said in between smashes.

"I give, I give, stop it!" Seamus screeched in an unusually high voice. Harry, Ron, and Neville could only laugh at the display in front of them and even Hermione managed a somewhat amused grin. Ron started sniffing the air much like Hermione did again. He caught on quicker than Hermione did and turned to Dean.

"Dean, you lucky Hippogriff," Ron strode forward but paused with his foot in the air as Harry and Dean furiously shook their heads without trying to attract the attention of Hermione Granger who was currently engaged in a conversation with the Boy-Who-Lived.

"She knows," Harry mouthed to Ron and nodded his head to the other Gryffindor Prefect, Hermione.

"Darn," Ron shook his head.

Harry turned to examine Hermione and Neville. They were whispering quietly to each other and Neville was occasionally rubbing the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. There was a slight constricting of his chest as he watched Hermione lightly touch Neville's elbow.

Damn heartburn. Shouldn't have drunk so much of the whiskey.

Harry rubbed his chest absent mindedly as he tore his eyes off of the pair and interested himself in the stitching of his bed sheets. He didn't really pay attention the surrounding conversations for a moment, losing himself in his own little world. Harry hadn't even noticed that someone was calling his name until the aforementioned person shook his shoulder.

Harry glanced up at the contact and subtly took a deep breath. Hermione was touching his shoulder.

Hermione Granger was touching Harry Potter's shoulder. Before he could envision where else Hermione could touch him though, she spoke.

"You up for doing some of the patrols tonight? One of the Ravenclaw Prefects owled in sick for the patrol although if you ask me, he's just trying to cheat and finish that Transfiguration essay early," Hermione frowned.

Harry cleared his throat and nodded as casually as possible, "Yeah, I guess I can do that."

"Good," Hermione smiled at him. Harry gulped.

"Did you hear?" Ron whispered conspiratorially.

"What?" Dean asked.

"Roger Davies got his letter today."

"Poor sod," Dean and Seamus shook their heads.

"One of the Ravenclaws said he was shipping out next week directly to the front lines," Ron shook his head as well.

"The letters are coming in faster, aren't they?" said a surprisingly sober Seamus.

"My Dad reckons they're only going to keep on coming," Ron said with more than a tinge of sadness in his voice.

"Bit of luck so far that none of us have gotten picked right?" Harry asked.

"Well, they haven't really been that desperate where they're picking Fifth years yet, but from what I can gather it's only a matter of time," Ron said.

"It's going to happen eventually, He's only getting stronger," Neville said in a hushed voice, absent mindedly rubbing his forehead.

Harry stared at Neville and marveled at the boy's ability to keep it together. The terror of the Wizarding World was exclusively after him and he still had the gall to attend classes. If it were another world, Harry was not sure if he could be able to do the same.

The letter that Roger Davies had received was a letter requesting his services to serve the Ministry in the War against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. After Harry's third year, You-Know-Who has mysteriously risen to power again. Harry suspected that it had something to do with the involvement of Sirius Black, his parent's once-friend. He knew that Ron, Hermione, and Neville somehow knew more than they let on about the former prisoner of Azkaban, but he didn't press. The Trio had enough on their plates without another inquiry from yet another person.

The letter's that people had been receiving, however, did impact Harry's life. It seemed as if more of these effervescently blue letters had been swooping into Hogwarts, asking the teenagers for their service in the War. The teenagers didn't really have any say in the matter though because it was implicitly understood that not fighting against You-Know-Who only meant that you were for him and not against him. Indeed, the last person who had made a scene of not serving for the Ministry had mysteriously disappeared the next evening, his clothes and belongings completely removed from his bedside. Although there were whispers of a Dementor's Kiss or even You-Know-Who himself collecting him, Harry reckoned that the Ministry had not taken kindly to being rejected and insisted upon his services.

Although the letters had only come into mostly Seventh years and some Sixth years, it was only a matter of time before more Sixth years and even some Fifth years were going to be called upon to fight against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Ron's insider information,



his Dad, was leaking that the battle against You-Know-Who hadn't really progressed since their surge from the latter end of Harry's Fourth year. The casualty count only grew with each passing week and their foreboding loom that had resided upon Hogwarts was felt from each student.

"You don't think they're going to start sending...girls to the front line, do you Ron?" Dean asked, glancing a look at Hermione who only glared back.

"Oh, no, of course not," Ron hurriedly said, sneaking looks at Hermione, "Reckon it won't ever get that drastic."

Hermione opened her mouth, no doubt about to lecture the boys about the injustices of sexual discrimination, but Neville laid a hand on her forearm and subtly shook his head. Although Hermione looked quite off put, she regressed nonetheless and didn't speak.

Damn heartburn. I really need to take a potion for this.

"Do you know anything more Neville?" Seamus ogled Neville's scar as he seemed to be quite inebriated again.

"Seamus!" Hermione yelled.

"No, its okay, Hermione," Neville said quietly.

"Um, no, I can't really say that I know anything more right now Seamus. I'm sure none of us have anything to worry about though."

Seamus nodded, obviously unperturbed by the apparent rudeness of his question. Hermione shook her head at him while Ron, Dean, and Harry fidgeted uncomfortably. There was a moment's silence as all of them mulled over their thoughts.

"Well, I'm going to get some more work done before my patrols start. I'll see you then Harry?" Hermione smiled pleasantly at him.

You can see me whenever you want.

"Oh yeah, I'll meet you in the Common Room before patrols start," Harry said without meeting her eyes.

"Okay, I'll see you two later," Hermione looked at Neville and Ron, "And I swear if I have to deal with you two again," Hermione looked at Seamus and Dean, "There's going to be hell to pay."

Dean sighed and spoke, "Sometimes I wish I could just stick something in her mouth to get her to shut up."

"That's what she said."

Everyone apart from Seamus then partook into beating him into a bloody pulp with their pillows.

A/N: I'm starting this story because "My Name is Harry Potter" is coming to a finish and I've had this idea in my head for quite some time. Although Neville is now the Boy-Who-Lived, not everything that occurred to Harry in Canon happened the same way it did to Neville. Obviously, there have to be differences. Reviews, reviews please! I'd really like some feedback on the direction of this story and any criticism is welcomed with open arms.

QuickQuill notes:

- "That's what she said" is a common joke from the TV series "The Office." I'm aware that The Office wasn't even on Muggle television at this time but I took some liberties with the joke.

- The majority of the Wizarding World has stayed the same (Draco Malfoy's still a Slytherin, Weasleys still live at the Burrow, etc.) but there are obviously some other things that have changed since Neville is the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry Potter and Hermione Granger exited the Gryffindor Common Room to fulfill their roles as Prefects and carry out their patrol. Tonight, the pair had the grim responsibility of carry out the corridors surrounding the Astronomy Tower. The corridor was noted for its penchant to house people that seemed to be attached at not only the mouth but also other appendages.

While Harry very, very much enjoyed patrolling Hermione, the Astronomy corridor patrol was one of his least favorites to patrol with her. She always seemed hell-bent on lecturing the caught couple into hopefully never coming back. Although most of the first-timers seemed to be intimidated by the female Prefect's fiery presence, the repeat offenders, namely Seamus, often received point deductions for their supposed offenses.

Harry blamed it on unresolved sexual tension.

Nonetheless, Harry set out on his duty to capture the villains of love and end their tyranny over the broom closet they happened to occupy that night. An angry Hermione led to a grumpy Hermione, and a grumpy Hermione lead to a flushed Hermione, and a flushed Hermione led to a blush which slowly crept up her neck and...

Harry had to stop there because he remembered that he hadn't worn the loose robes.

The soft tip tap of their shoes was the only thing that gave them away to any unsuspecting students that were meandering around. It wasn't a particularly dark night as the waning moon cast a pale light on the cobblestone floor of Hogwarts. Harry didn't bother to try small talk as he and Hermione had done enough patrols together this year that there weren't too many awkward silences. Harry made sure not to walk too close in order to avoid any awkward moments such as a touch of hands or a slight bump of shoulders.

The pair finished their first round around the corridors and headed down a different route to the more outer areas of the corridor surrounding the Astronomy Tower. Hermione had figured out that the best way to capture unsuspecting students was to randomize their movement every night and more importantly, cover as much ground as possible. Such actions made Harry dislike the Astronomy tower patrol even more as a hurried pace often implied less talking as talking only seemed to slow down Hermione.

But tonight, Hermione walked along in a pace that could only be described as leisurely. Surprised by the lack of vigor on her part, Harry attempted to strike up a conversation. To this point, Harry had walked one step behind Hermione as she usually led the way. Harry didn't mind as he wasn't much into catching the actual students but he certainly appreciated the view.

As Harry opened his mouth to speak, however, he closed it as he didn't have anything particularly witty to say. The first question that popped into his head was, "How are you?"

Harry deemed that question seemingly boring and appalling unintelligent for someone of Hermione's intellect. Perhaps a better question would be, "How are your classes?"

Well that's stupid too.

There was no real point in asking Hermione how her classes went. Harry already knew that she had top marks in everything but Defense Against the Dark Arts (Neville had the highest marks there) and was only a hair behind in Potions (Harry had the highest marks there). Harry never brought that subject up around Hermione though because he feared that she would bite his head off (not that one though) for being better than her in something concerning academics.

Want to go with me to Hogsmeade?

Harry shook his head at his own temerity. That would be an awful question to ask. Obviously, she would say no, no doubt to her dedication to her studies. Besides, Harry reasoned, she only goes to Hogsmeade with Neville and Ron anyways. No, that question would be a decidedly stupid question to ask.

Did you see my last Quidditch game?

That was a terrible question as well, Harry thought as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. Of course she had seen the last Quidditch game, Ron was the bloody Keeper. Who was he to say it was his Quidditch game as well? Hermione had certainly gone to the Quidditch game to see Harry catch the Snitch...again.

Spit or –

Harry could never finish that last question thought because he had run directly into Hermione. While he was busy pondering the mysteries of life, Hermione had kept an eye out for any unsuspecting students and apparently she had heard a noise which was usually indicative of a couple engaged in the act of kissing. Harry, lost in his own world, ran straight into her bushy hair. With an oomph, Harry took two steps backward and profusely apologized for bumping into her. Hermione just smiled at him and motioned him to keep quiet.

"I think I heard something," she whispered to him once he was close enough again.

"A knut says its Seamus again," Harry whispered back.

"You just lost a knut then because I heard Lavender asking Seamus to help her with some Transfiguration homework in the common room tonight," Hermione smirked at him.

"Since when has Transfiguration stopped Seamus from coming out here," he smirked back.

"Excellent point Mr. Potter, let's find out," Hermione smiled mischievously.

The pair yanked the door open and the couple inside immediately broke apart and rushed to straighten their clothes.

"Ginny!" Hermione yelled.

"Hermione!"

"I'm Harry," Harry said cheekily.

"I know who you are, Harry," Ginny said, irritated. The boy with her seemed to not want to show his face, obviously embarrassed at being caught.

"I told you I was going to be patrolling tonight," Hermione now had her hands on her hips and was about to steam onto full lecture mode before Ginny held a hand up to stop her.

"I know, I know Hermione, I don't need the lecture right now. Come on Michael," Ginny pulled Michael Corner's hand as she scurried away from the patrolling Prefects. Michael was still blushing and mumbled a "sorry" and "won't happen again" before the couple disappeared around the corner.

"Honestly, the nerve of that girl. If she wasn't Ron's sister, I would have definitely deducted at least five points," Hermione huffed, upset that the younger girl didn't listen to her.

Harry merely shrugged at her and closed the broom closet door. The pair resumed their patrol in silence, but Harry was glad for the temporary reprieve that finding the pair had bought him. His mind was straying into wandering territory.

"So, Harry, how are you?" Hermione asked. Harry nearly smacked his forehead.

"I'm doing alright, you know. Just trying to focus on school and what not," Harry shrugged nonchalantly.

"Of course you are. That's why you're the only sensible boy amongst those hooligan friends of yours," Hermione said in a biting tone. The bite was somewhat taken off of her statement though by the slight grin she had on her face.

"Eh, you know them, after Snape railed into them for accidentally mixing pig fat counter-clockwis in their Essence of Odor potion they needed a little break," Harry looked at Hermione knowingly. She only laughed and shook her head as she too recalled the pair's disastrous final solution.

"I tried to tell Neville that too, but he wouldn't listen. You know how Snape gets to him," Hermione frowned.

"Yeah, Snape can be a real git sometimes. I don't know why he has it out for Neville."

Professor Severus Snape was the esteemed potions professor at Hogwarts and took every opportunity to torment the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry didn't know the particular reason for the Potions Professor's

taunting, but Harry reckoned it had something to do with the fact that from the first day of their First year, the pair did not get along well.

Snape gave almost no preferences, save the Slytherin House, and immediately had set out to torment the Gryffindor House's most popular resident for their remaining time at Hogwarts. While he was never vile or cruel outright, his constant egging on of Neville had caused quite a few ruckuses during their time spent at Hogwarts. While the majority of Gryffindor surmised that Snape had it out for Neville because Neville had destroyed You-Know-Who (Snape had been a former follower), Harry did not think that was the case.

"I always tell him to ignore Professor Snape, but he's so stubborn sometimes," Hermione rolled her eyes, no doubt recollecting some recent memory of Neville being stubborn.

Harry declined to respond, not wishing to further the conversation to Neville Longbottom. While he was the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry was a somewhat good friend of his, he couldn't help the jealousy that spiked up when Hermione talked about Neville. She talked about him quite often too. Hermione was about to speak, and Harry quickly interrupted her to save himself from more Neville talk.

"Did you see my last Quidditch match?" Harry blurted out, nearly smacking himself in the forehead again. Hermione looked at him curiously before responding.

"Of course I did, you did brilliantly."

Harry shrugged nonchalantly again but couldn't help the smile that broke his features.

"Ron did really well too," Harry said, not wanting to seem big-headed.

"He did alright; his nerves always get to him."

"I know what you mean. I've had a couple talks with him to try to get him to concentrate but it's really 50/50 once he hits the pitch," Harry nodded knowingly. Hermione rolled her eyes as if to say, "Tell me about it."

There was a lull in their conversation as the pair began their second leg of their patrol in the Great Hall. As they neared the end of the Hall, Harry gazed at the Ministry Decrees that had adorned the archway. The Ministry, in all of its mightly glory, had decided that certain "precautions" were to be taken now that the War had escalated. While most of the Decrees were harmless (Decree 18: Report any suspicious behavior), there was a rumor that the Ministry would soon be sending a representative of some sort for "quality assurance." Harry's thoughts were interrupted once again by Hermione.

"So what are you doing over the holiday?" Hermione politely asked.

"Oh, I'm going home to my mum's this year, reckon I should keep her some company after staying here last year for the Yule Ball and everything."

"Yeah, I'm going home to stay with my parents for a little while as well. Didn't know how much I would miss them since the War has started," Hermione said sadly.

"I know what you mean, I worry about her all the time since she was a target in the last War," Harry said solemnly.

"She'll be alright, she always seemed real smart from when I talked to her at the Train stop. How's your dad?" Hermione asked. Harry shrugged again, an action that Hermione noticed he seemed to use in abundance.

"Same old Dad, you know. Off out and about doing whatever he does," Harry said with a rueful smile on his face. Hermione patted his shoulder and offered him a friendly smile.

"Want to talk about it?"

"What's there to talk about?" Harry shrugged again, "I reckon he'll come around for presents and what not, but you know my Dad and my Mum can't really stand each other."

"It must be difficult sometimes..." Hermione trailed off, letting him continue.



"It's not too bad, I get to visit Dad a little more now than before. Ron reckons it's because my Mum's getting tired of studying in the kitchen and taking up all the space," Harry joked.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with studying, stupid Ron, I don't know why I –"

"Hermione. Joking."

"Oh, right," Hermione had the grace to blush at her little outburst.

"Anyways, last time I went to visit Dad, he helped me out in some Defense lessons. Taught me these nifty jinxes I could use in case...well...you know..." Harry trailed off this time.

"I know."

There was another silence as their patrol neared an end. Harry was caught up thinking about his parents now that Hermione had brought it up again. He knew that his Mom and Dad loved him dearly but never really understood why they weren't together. Harry knew that when he was young, Dad and Mom had taken to living apart from each other. They couldn't be divorced because of the magic that bonded them from marriage but for some odd reason that Harry could never get out of his Mom, they had disagreed on something and didn't live together. Whenever they were within talking distance of each other, it usually devolved into a shouting match of epic proportions.

One time, Harry's Dad was worked up into such a fit that he accidentally broke twelve-year-old Harry's brand new Nimbus 2000. Needless to say, Harry didn't talk to his Dad until his Dad bought him another one. Whenever Harry approached either his Mom or his Dad about their living conditions and seemingly unstable relationship, they both repeated the same thing.

"We love you very much, but we just have agreed to disagree on some things."

Harry rolled his eyes at the usual pomp and circumstance that surrounded his interrogation of the two of them. The pair seemed like they would make a lovely cup had they not hated each other. His Mom spoiled him entirely too much but also kept a strict line

when it came to academics. As a result, Harry was very studious and a little reserved when he first came to Hogwarts. His Dad, on the other hand, was quite the opposite. Boisterous and seemingly always up to no good, it was only recently when Harry had spent more time with his Dad that he had grown a bit of a rebellious side.

"Harry?"

Harry broke out of his reverie yet again and saw Hermione touching his elbow.

"Finally," she half-joked as she looked at him. He snorted and mumbled a sorry.

"Let's head back now. We're through for the night," authoritative Hermione said.

"Yes milady," Harry bowed with an exaggerated flourish, "Lead the way."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his slight immaturity but couldn't help a ghost of a smile from appearing on her face.

"Almost got a smile," Harry said with a wide grin.

"Almost, Harry, now don't push it and let's back," Hermione grinned and gave him a light shove. The pair joked and jostled a little more as they headed back towards the Gryffindor tower, careful not to make too much noise as to ruin their façade as perfect Prefects.

As Hermione climbed through the Portrait hole, however, she grew serious as she spied Neville asleep on one of the couches. He was mumbling and fidgeted quite a bit, threatening to fall off the couch. The pair made their way to Neville, Hermione in front of Harry.

As they came nearer, Harry was aware of the tight lines on Neville's forehead. His scar seemed to be a light red and he was starting to sweat. He couldn't make out the words that were coming out of Neville's mouth, but Harry reasoned that Neville wasn't having one of those dreams.

"Go on, Harry, I'll wake him up," Hermione looked at him and nodded towards the staircase. Harry hesitated for a moment, one foot ready to leave and the other foot planted on the ground.

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me, Harry, I'll see you tomorrow," Hermione hadn't bothered to look at Harry this time and was staring down at Neville's slightly twitching form.

Harry left without another word. There were times when he envied Neville Longbottom.

Now was not one of them.

A/N: How convenient that even before I got the reviews that this chapter had already been written. That should answer some of the persistent questions I got about Harry's parents. Thank you very much for the reviews. They've been very helpful and a lot of good questions have been asked. In regards to what has stayed Canon and what has not, this chapter should answer some of those questions but no doubt raise other ones as well. The only thing I can say is...keep reading and reviewing please J

QuickQuill Notes:

-There haven't been any Ministry representatives at Hogwarts so far

-Harry is the Gryffindor Seeker and Ron is the Gryffindor Keeper. Neville does not play Quidditch.

Harry felt a soft tickling beside his ear. Although his eyes were closed, he could feel the bright rays of light trying to penetrate the formidable darkness of his now disturbed sleep. Mumbling incoherently, Harry brought his hand up to brush the offending particle that disturbed his ear. As his hand reached up, however, he made contact with firmly solid material.

With his eyes closed, he investigated the source of his disturbance and kept blindly reaching behind him. His hand groped blindly and for a couple of seconds he could not quite register what the object beside his ear was.

Quite suddenly, something wet flicked out and touched his thumb. Harry let out a rather effeminate screech as he clambered off his bed and reached for his wand. Clutching his wand closely to his chest, Harry groaned as he realized that the room was still a bunch of dully pixilated blurs and reached for the glasses residing on his bedside table. It wasn't until he heard a soft giggling that he turned around and finally saw who had disturbed him from a rather pleasant dream.

"Dammit Ginny, you're such a bloody nuisance," Harry grumbled as he glared at the freckled face of the youngest Weasley.

Harry begrudgingly admitted that Ginny had started to grow quite into her own. Her long red hair accentuated the rather childish features of her face. Blessed with large cheeks and a smatter of freckles across her nose, Ginny Weasley held a sort of cute innocence about her. Harry knew it was just a visage for a rather mischievous spirit, no doubt influenced by her plethora of brothers.

Harry and Ginny's relationship was quite strange at first. Harry quickly found that he was the odd man out in the dorm room. Ron and Neville had been fast friends since they had met on the train in their First Year and while Harry had been present in their compartment, Ron and Neville had seemingly grown together. Seamus and Dean formed the other man couple of the dorm room which had left Harry by himself. Harry, a loner even when he was growing up, didn't particularly mind as he was decent enough friends with both pairs but he nonetheless felt lonely at times.

When Ginny Weasley arrived at Hogwarts, Harry didn't pay any particular attention to her until his Fourth Year. While Ron and

Neville were out on their adventures, and Seamus and Dean had become quite the inseparable heterosexual couple, Harry found himself talking to the only daughter of the Weasley clan. He might have had a slight attraction to the freckled girl but quickly found out that they were hell-bent on causing as much torment in each other's lives. Accepting that he was the proverbial and literal fifth wheel in his dorm, Harry found himself spending quite a bit of time with the youngest Weasley and despite the teasing, grew a solid friendship with her.

Now if only I could find a way to shut her up for more than two minutes.

"Oh, you looked like such an idiot," she said in between giggles. Harry continued to glare at her as he snatched a shirt to cover his bare chest. Ginny mock fainted into his bed at the sight of his chest, and Harry retaliated by throwing a particularly dirty practice shirt at her face.

"Ugh, you're absolutely worse than Ron sometimes," she said as she lifted the speckled brown and green shirt from her face after a couple of sniffs.

"Yeah, well, at least Ron doesn't wake me up by blowing into my ear," Harry said as he grabbed a pair of socks from his dresser, "What are you doing here anyways?"

"In case you haven't noticed Prefect Potter, it's nearly noon," Ginny smirked, still lying down in his bed.

"What?" Harry quickly checked his watch and discovered that he had indeed missed two classes already and was in danger of being late to Creatures. He quickly found a fresh shirt to put on and abandoned a trip to the shower after an experimental sniff of his armpit.

"What are you doing up here anyways?" Harry said, mildly irritated that he had somehow overslept.

"I don't have classes on Tuesdays remember?" Ginny sighed. She sat up and gave Harry one of her mischievous looks.

"Why did YOU over sleep Mr. Potter? Late night with the one Hermione Granger?" she was grinning widely now, obviously enjoying Harry's squirming. Harry rolled his eyes for a moment and gave her the rather immature middle finger.

"Bugger off Ginny, I have to get to class."

"Oh, don't worry, I'll walk with you," she said brightly, not willing to let Harry leave the line of questioning so easily. Harry glared at her but knew she was not going to leave him alone. Without a word, he quickly exited the dorm, hoping that she would tire of him quickly. Unfortunately, he heard her leap up from his bed and follow him down the staircase.

"Why don't you ever just leave me alone?" Harry asked.

"Who else would you talk to? Who else would help you with your rather sordid love life?" Ginny continued to smile rather widely at the grumpy Potter.

"My love life is not sordid," Harry grumbled.

"Not right now it isn't. Right now, it's rather...non-existent."

"I could throw you over this railing."

"With what, your non-existent muscles of stone?" she gave a perfunctory poke against his rather underdeveloped bicep to make her point. Harry batted her hand away and stuck his tongue out at her as they continued to descend the staircase leading towards the rather empty dorm rooms.

"Ginny, why don't you just stay in the Common Room while I go find a blunt object to beat you with," Harry rolled his eyes, unbelieving that he had sunk to her level of insults.

"That's rather kinky of you, Harry," she fluttered her eyes at him with a mocking smile on her face while she twirled a stray lock on pinky finger. Harry couldn't quite take her ribbing anymore and poked her ticklish ribs with his index finger.

"Hey! That's off-limits!" she said, shocked at his retaliation as they reached the Common Room.

"You asked for it Ginny! Just leave me alone already," Harry whined, quickly picking up his pace as he strode purposefully towards the portrait.

"Alright, bed sniffer, just one more question."

"What?" Harry asked irritably as he opened the portrait.

"Do Ron and Neville know you say Hermione's name in your sleep?"

Harry promptly slammed the portrait in Ginny's smirking face.

Harry skidded around the corner just before the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor closed the classroom door.

"So sorry Professor! I...err...I...sort of overslept," Harry uncomfortably fidgeted in the front of the class as he tried to explain his tardiness.

"That's quite alright, Mr. Potter. I'll forgive it this time since you're usually very punctual," Professor Sheppard gave him one last bemused look before he turned to address the rest of the class. Harry quickly took a seat to Ron's left and waved to the rest of the Gryffindors seated down the row.

He focused his attention on the Ministry-employed Professor situated at the front of the class. Professor Sheppard (he refused to give the students his first name) had been appointed by the Ministry in an effort to advance the learning of their rather abysmal DADA curriculum. Haunted by a myriad of seemingly unlucky or incompetent teachers, the Ministry saw it fit to intervene and supply their own "qualified" teacher. Although Dumbledore certainly rejected any sort of government intervention on Hogwarts, he had allowed this certain professor to teach what most thought was the most important class since the War had resumed.

Professor Sheppard, a former Auror, was a tall, thin man that oddly reminded Harry of a grasshopper. Thin, almost pencil like arms were marked by his rather bony elbows which only further enhanced his rather insectile appearance. Harry guessed that he was entering the later half-century of his life but much like Dumbledore, his age only gave him an air of authority which none of the class, even the

Slytherins, dared question. The only professor of equal competence in the field was Professor Lupin of Harry's Third Year. He, unfortunately, had been sacked on the account of his being a werewolf. To Harry, it was quite unfortunate because he was rather fond of the chocolate insisting professor.

"Alright class, today marks the beginning of dueling sessions," Professor Sheppard paced back and forth in the front of the class with his hands behind his back and his posture perfect. He was the most extreme example of a perfect Auror.

There was a murmur of whispers and the students turned to each other, excited and nervous at the same time. Harry leaned forward in his seat a bit to catch the professor's every word.

"Before we start, however, I need to lay down some ground rules," he gave everyone a stern glance as he flicked his wand at the chalkboard.

"There is to be no jerking around," he barked, "This is of the utmost serious matter, and the second I see you endanger yourself or any of your classmates, I will forcibly remove you from this class."

"Professor Dumbledore, along with Professor Flitwick, have created these special medallions that you **MUST** wear anytime you are preparing to duel. It is charmed to not only protect you from some of the more dangerous hexes that you will be flinging at each other but to also recognize which curses have hit you so we can identify your weaknesses. It will keep a rolling tally of what curses you have hit and also what curses you specialize in using," he barked each word with the utmost silence in the classroom.

"You will not be graded until your final evaluation, but I will be taking notes so do not be mistaken by your lack of grades. Your performances will be judged constantly by me."

Harry felt Ron turn to whisper something to Hermione and Neville as the Trio murmured quietly. He didn't quite know what to expect out of the Trio in terms of their dueling skills. Harry had only seen Neville duel in their Second Year and it was hardly a duel after Neville had spoken in Parseltongue to the enchanted snake. He already knew Hermione was quite smart and therefore knew she



could at least defend herself though he had never seen her in combat. While Ron might have seemed to be the least talented of the Trio, Harry had played enough chess with him to know that there was a certain strategic element that only Ron could master.

Harry's ears perked as Professor Sheppard cleared his throat.

"For today's lesson, you will be matched with a partner. In combat, you will usually be accompanied by at least one, if not more people. Therefore, it is imperative that you develop the communication skills necessary to enter combat with a partner. As such, I will be assigning partners," there was a groan from the class.

"Longbottom...Crabbe," Harry saw Neville roll his eyes at his misfortune. Crabbe, a Slytherin, stupidly gaped at the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Weasley...Granger," Ron gulped as he glanced at Hermione out of the corner of his eye.

"Brown...Thomas."

"Finnegan...Goyle."

Professor Sheppard continued to assign partners as Harry patiently awaited his assignment. After a quick head count, Harry was dismayed to find an odd number of students in this class.

Maybe I'll partner up with the Professor.

Harry had no such luck. Professor Sheppard seemed to realize his predicament as he finally arrived in front of Harry. As he was opening his mouth to speak, however, one last student walked into class. Harry could only groan at his misfortune.

He was going to be partnered with Draco Malfoy.

"Mr. Malfoy, thank you for gracing us with your present," Professor Sheppard barked, "Five points from Slytherin for excessive tardiness."

"Sorry Professor," Malfoy did not look the least bit sorry.

"You're going to be partnered with Potter," Professor Sheppard eyed the blond teenager.

Harry met Malfoy's eyes for a moment and resolutely glared at the sour Slytherin.

"You can't be serious," Malfoy eyed Harry like he was some unfortunate every flavor bean that had become stuck on his expensive shoes.

"I am very serious. Your performance is influenced by your ability to communicate with your partner Mr. Malfoy. I hope you two become friends quickly," Professor Sheppard addressed the Slytherin icily before returning to his spot in the front of the class.

Harry begrudgingly moved his bag so Malfoy could sit next to him. Malfoy eyed the seat beside Harry warily and opted to sit one seat down from him. Harry only rolled his eyes at the rather exaggerated show of petulance.

"I will give you ten minutes to discuss with your partner before I start assigning duels," Professor Sheppard announced before taking a seat behind his desk.

For a minute or two, Harry and Malfoy just glared at each other. Neither of them insisted to be the first to speak. Recognizing that they eventually had to cooperate, Harry sighed and opened his mouth to speak.

"Listen, Malfoy, you git, we're going to have to eventually dual another pair so we might as well learn our strengths...weaknesses," Harry grinded his teeth as Malfoy continued to simply glare at him.

"My only weakness is that I'm partnered with such an incompetent duelist," Malfoy drawled. Harry bit out a sharp retort.

While Harry was by no means a complete failure at Defence, the only time in which he was asked to demonstrate his talents was his rather paltry performance against a boggart in his Third Year. Embarrassed by what the boggart had turned into, Harry froze on the spot and Professor Lupin was forced to quietly ask for the next person to advance. Since that incident, Harry had a reputation of being a panicked student.

Harry was resolutely prepared to enter this duel with much more ferocity. His Dad had been visiting Harry more frequently ever since the conception of the Second War. Although Harry was glad that he had a chance to see his father more often, James and Lily Potter seemed to still maintain a slightly frosty relationship. Nevertheless, Harry embraced every opportunity to see his father as his father had started to impart his knowledge of Defence to Harry.

I have just a couple little tricks that I'm ready to show.

Harry broke out of his grim thought by addressing Malfoy again.

"Nevertheless Malfoy, you're stuck with me so we better formulate a plan of some sort," Harry managed to speak without insulting the blond. Malfoy rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

"Here's the plan, you try and not be a complete failure at life while I watch and defend whatever paltry curse comes at me," Malfoy blew a stray lock out of his eyes.

"Excellent, Professor Sheppard will mark me down as the excellent Defence student while writes down how you're a bumbling idiot," Harry couldn't contain his remark any longer.

"Do you really think that's what he will be writing down Four Eyes? Merlin, I knew you were thick."

Harry was caught aback by Malfoy's statement and struggled to recover without seeming to desperate to know the answer. Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, Harry could see that Malfoy was not going to continue his tirade.

"What is he writing then?"

Malfoy seemed to size up Harry with his rather patented glare. Harry only stared back at him. After a moment, Malfoy relaxed his posture and turned to address Harry properly for the first time.

"Only because you're a Potter," Malfoy sneered while Harry rolled his eyes again, "Sheppard over there is just taking down notes for his Ministry buddies so they know who to send those letters to."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh, you dimwit. While my father would never let that happen, I'm not going to take my chances. Now you understand why I'm just going to sit there and let you hound the glory," Malfoy went back to crossing his arms and idly blowing the hair out of his eyes.

Harry was surprised by the rather dismal turn of events. While he certainly wanted to perform to the best of his new capabilities, he did not want to attract any unwanted attention by the Ministry. He did not want to receive one of those bright, blue letters anytime soon. Before he could mull over his thoughts, however, Professor Sheppard stood up to mark the beginning of their first dueling session.

"Now, remember what we have studied so far. For now, you are strictly FORBIDDEN to cast any hex that could permanently damage one of your fellow classmates. Any curses I deem are restricted will no doubt lead to your immediate expulsion. Am I making myself clear?" The student body in the class nodded their heads.

"Excellent, first up...Longbottom and Crabbe versus...Patil and Macmillan."

"This one is going to be a joy," Malfoy said with more than a bit of sarcasm. Harry could not help but agree with the git beside him. Although Longbottom was partnered with Crabbe, Harry doubted Patil and Macmillan could take the Boy-Who-Lived regardless. He wasn't the top of the Defence class for no reason.

There was a shrill whistle as Professor Sheppard started the dueling session.

Padma and Ernie immediately threw two Disarming Charms at Crabbe. Neville immediately conjured a Protego to deflect both of the charms. Crabbe spun dumbly to avoid the charms. Unfortunately, he managed to simply walk out from behind the Shield and into the line of fire yet again. Padma and Ernie combined to throw two more Disarming Charms at Crabbe. Crabbe somehow managed to narrow his rather wide body as the two charms managed to miss him by a wide margin.

The pair who had the advantage prepared to cast another series of Disarming Charms but suddenly came under fire from Neville. Neville quickly cast a series of spells and Harry could make out Impedimenta and Immobulus as two of the spells that Neville uttered. While Padma managed to conjure her shield in time, Ernie's shield was considerably weaker and he was blasted off of his feet and propelled into the air.

"Herbivicus!" Padma yelled with a flourish of her wand.

An overgrowth of plants promptly came in between the dueling partners, obscuring their vision of one another. Harry could even see Malfoy was mildly impressed by Padma's quick thinking.

"Diffindo! Expelliarmus!"

There were a couple of sharp cracks of the conjured branches as Neville's severing charm opened the way for his potent Disarming spell which just missed over Padma's shoulder. Harry watched as Padma, partially obscured by her charm, pulled Ernie to his feet.

"Herbivicus!" now Ernie incanted his own spell and there was more overgrowth obscuring their vision. Harry watched as Neville slowly stepped through the plants, careful not to break any branches as to give away his position. Crabbe was dumbly situated on the other side of the overgrowth with his wand in front of him, looking quite like a frightened first year.

Harry watched as Padma and Ernie made their way to the exposed Crabbe. Harry could see that they were looking to eliminate the other threat to simplify the duel. Neville had seemingly realized the same thing. Harry watched as Neville backtracked his way to Crabbe and kneeled down behind a rather large bush with Crabbe in sight. The classroom was deathly quiet as they watched the exhilarating cat and mouse game. Crabbe still did not see Padma and Ernie and realized his predicament too late. Two disarming charms flew out of the shrubbery on target. Crabbe screamed and shielded his face as he prepared himself for the inevitable.

The inevitable did not occur, however, as Crabbe toppled over and narrowly avoided the two Charms. Neville had anticipated Padma and Ernie's plan and threw an Impedimenta at Crabbe's feet as soon as he saw the two charms fly out from the trees.

"Incendio!"

A small fire erupted near Padma and Ernie's location. Padma yelled and Harry could only watch as she jumped out from the shrubbery in her panic to avoid the fire, her body twisting and turning to and fro to dodge the flames.

"Padma, no!" Ernie stretched his arm to yank Padma back into the overgrowth.

"Expelliarmus!"

Ernie's wand flew from his outstretched arm. Padma seemed to realize her error and turned to face a sprinting Neville Longbottom.

"Impedimenta! Expelliarmus! Flipendo!" Padma yelled in fright.

Neville deftly ducked and dodged the three incoming spells. Harry felt that Neville did not need to even duck because the spells were terribly off target. Neville muttered a quiet Expelliarmus and raised three wands in his right hand to signal victory.

Professor Sheppard gave three blows of his whistle to signal the end of the duel. After Professor Sheppard casted a series of counter-curses, the room returned to its normal state. Neville handed the wands back to its owners. Ernie snatched his wand out of Neville's hand a bit more quickly than Padma, his pride no doubt stung by the defeat.

Harry watched as Neville walked back to Ron and Hermione. Ron clapped him on the back, no doubt expressing his congratulations while Hermione took him by the elbow and talked to him excitedly. Harry was not surprised by Neville's good showing. He knew from observing Neville that he was quite the student in Defence, no doubt confident from his previous experiences with various Dark creatures and Dark wizards.

Harry smiled to himself though, prepared to show that he was not nearly the scared Defence student that he had been in his Third Year. Professor Sheppard, however, did not call his name next. Instead, Seamus was called, and Harry watched as his dorm mate nervously approached the circle marking the dueling arena.

This process continued as Harry watched student after student duel each other. After Neville's rather impressive showing, the rest of the students struggled to even disarm each other. Harry noted that a majority of the student's spells were simply off target. Harry listened to Malfoy's rather sour commentary as the dueling continued and found he begrudgingly agreed with the criticism. Harry noted that there were few standouts from any of the Houses.

After watching Dean Thomas receive a sound beating from Blaise Zabini, Harry realized that there were only two pairs remaining. He was suddenly unsure whether to reveal his plethora of knowledge since he was going to duel Hermione and Ron. Harry snuck a glance at Hermione and their eyes met for a second. She had a determined look on her face that slightly unnerved Harry. He knew how competitive Hermione was and for the first time, Harry was unsure whether he would emerge the victor in this battle.

Do not doubt yourself Harry. Move with conviction.

James Potter's warning rang clear and loud in Harry's head. Shaking himself, he nodded at Hermione and Ron who nodded back at him. Harry turned to address Malfoy and found Malfoy taking off his robes and rolling up his sleeves.

"I thought you said you were just going to defend yourself?"

"There's no way I'm going to lose to Weasley and the mighty Huntress," Malfoy muttered as he rolled up his sleeves. Harry opened his mouth to retort but Malfoy cut him off.

"Just shut your chivalry Potter, we don't have time for it. Just make sure you don't go stumbling into my line of fire. As long as you stay out of my way and don't cause me a nuisance, then we should be...why the hell are you smiling?" Malfoy was infuriated by Harry's smirk.

"I think you're the one that's going to need help Malfoy."

"Figures. Stupid Gryffindor knows he's going to lose and just takes it in stride. Why'd I have to get stuck with such a stumbling dumberville."

"Just make sure not to cross my line of fire, Malfoy."

"Fat chance of that happening. That requires you actual getting off a spell," Malfoy said as the pair crossed the line of the dueling circle.

Harry cracked his neck as he surveyed the pair across from them. Hermione stood with her back ramrod straight, her head held up high. Ron looked as if he were bracing himself for a fist fight. His knees were slightly bent and his chin tucked into his chest. Harry gulped as he waited for Professor Sheppard to blow his whistle. He quickly tried to summarize what his Dad had taught him during the past year. His wand felt sticky in his hand. He could feel the perspiration making its way down the back of his shirt, his body eagerly anticipating the duel. Sneaking a look at Malfoy, Harry saw that the blond had taken to glaring at his two friends. Harry did note, however, that the boy's jaw was clenched very tightly, and he could make out the blonde's quivering jaw bone.

The sharp blast in the air indicated the beginning of the duel. Immediately, Hermione fired what must have been at least four spells. Harry anticipated this action as he watched the dizzying array of beams streak towards him and Malfoy. What he did not anticipate, however, was Malfoy promptly shoving him to the ground. His knee made unexpected contact with the stone floor and Harry grimaced at the sharp pain.

You have to be bloody kidding me.

Harry barely managed to avoid Ron's Stunner and quickly rolled to make himself not a smaller target but a mobile one as well. Tucking his legs in, Harry leapt up in one smooth motion and blindly fired a Disarming charm in Hermione and Ron's direction.

"Incendio!"

Malfoy directed the conflagration towards the Muggle-Born Witch and Harry watched as Hermione coolly spoke.

"Duro!"

The small fireball immediately turned into a flying piece of granite. Hermione deftly stepped sideways and avoided the flying debris.



"Come on Bug-Eyed Bastard! Do something useful!" Malfoy yelled at him.

Malfoy's words seemed to break Harry's proverbial dueling barrier and he quickly fired a pair of Stunners at Ron. Ron avoided the first one and threw up a quick shield to deflect his second Stunner. Harry did not abate his attack but continued to push forward.

"Incarcerous! Obscuro!"

Ron managed to hop out of the way of the ropes that were looking to bind him but could not avoid the magical blindfold. Stumbling, Ron finally lost his balance trying to rip the blindfold off of his head. Harry fired a Stunner to finish him off.

Unfortunately, Hermione managed to summon a book just in time to intercept Harry's Stunner. Harry's Stunner was so strong that it managed to keep pushing the book into Ron's direction and there was a loud thud as the book came in contact with Ron's head.

"Oh bloody fuck!"

Harry fired three more Stunners at Ron but Hermione managed to summon not only a chair but one of the bird cages that were left over from Lupin. The objects continued to pelt Ron which only further irritated the red head.

Hermione was now under fire from Malfoy and Harry while she tried to rescue Ron from his magical blindfold. She awkwardly ducked another jinx from Malfoy while Harry kept a stream of pressure on Ron, finally seeing Malfoy's strategy. Harry was waiting for the moment to attack Hermione, who was distracted by the heavy fire coming from Malfoy's direction. He could see that she was quickly weakening, not used to the furious pace of the duel.

"Reducto!"

Malfoy didn't aim the curse at either of their adversaries but instead at the ground in front of them. Harry could only watch as he saw Hermione get blown off her feet before Malfoy and Harry were surrounded by the ensuing dust. The dust seeped into his nostrils and try as he might, Harry could not stop himself from sneezing.

"ACHOO!"

Malfoy glared at him for revealing their position but there was no retaliation from either Hermione or Ron. The pair squinted to find their targets but it was no use. The thick cloud of dust blinded them from not only Hermione and Ron but the rest of the class as well.

"Expelliarmus!"

The Disarming Charm shot out from the cloud of dust and struck Harry. Harry could only watch, horrified at losing the duel, as his wand started to slip out of his hand.

No!

To Harry's great surprise, his wand turned in mid-air and came right back to him. His mouth dropped open as he struggled to rationalize what had just happened. He didn't quite have the time to sit and study, however, as a slew of curses suddenly broke the heavy dust in the air.

Ron had managed to Finite his blindfold and was now supporting Hermione as it was Harry and Malfoy's turn to be on the defensive side of the duel. No longer handicapped by Ron's inability to see, Hermione was releasing an absolutely horrifying amount of jinxes and it took all of Harry's quick reflexes to dodge and void the rampage. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Malfoy was struggling to avoid the jinxes as well.

Harry was not quick enough to dodge a cleverly placed Impedimenta and tripped onto his back. Ron saw his chance to subdue Harry and fired a number of Stunners his way.

"Protego Maxima!"

Instead of Harry's usual golden, shimmering shield, a dark blue shield was summoned in its place and there was a loud gong as the Stunners reverberated off of the shield and raced back towards its castor. Ron was wide eyed as he saw the number of beams in his direction and was not quick enough to avoid all of them. With a final Expelliarmus, Harry downed one of his adversaries.

Unfortunately, Hermione was overwhelming Malfoy. Like a furious storm, Hermione kept moving forward, her mouth moving as quick as her wand hand as spell after spell came flying towards Malfoy.

"Ventus!"

The strong gust of wind knocked Malfoy's wand finally out of his hand and Malfoy turned around to see three blue Stunner heading his direction.

"Accio shoe! Waddiwasi!"

In two quick spells, Harry summoned Malfoy's shoe, thus pulling the boy off his feet and out of the way of the Stunners. After summoning the shoe, he flung it back towards Hermione. Hermione was caught off the guard by the rather strange object flying in her direction. Harry used her slight letdown as his opportunity to win.

"Ventus!"

Hermione's wand flew out of her hand. She glared at Harry as she realized her imminent defeat. Still on his back, Harry scrambled to his feet and pointed his wand at Hermione. Gulping, Harry found himself unable to cast any spells.

Do not doubt yourself Harry. Move with conviction.

Although his Dad's warning rang in his head, Harry still found himself unable to disarm Hermione.

"Potter, what the bloody hell!" Malfoy scrambled over to his wand and Harry finally blinked out of his daze. It was too late, however, as Hermione already reached her wand. With a quick Accio and another Expelliarmus, Hermione summoned Malfoy's wand and disarmed Harry. Numb, Harry watched as Hermione glared at him while raising the three wands.

Harry could only distinctly hear Professor Sheppard blowing his whistle three times. He was still somewhat shell-shocked that he had lost the duel after clearly having the upper hand.

"What the fuck's the matter with you Potter? You had the bloody Mudblood right there! Leave it to a fucking Gryffindor not to win the

duel because of some smarmy sense of chivalry. Merlin, you're so incompetent I could probably have gotten a bleeding House-Elf to be my partner and win!" Malfoy was furious and in Harry's face but to Harry it was just a dull ringing in his ears.

"HELLO! Anyone in that empty skull!" Malfoy tapped Harry's head twice and knocked him out of his stupor. Harry shoved Malfoy in the chest and muttered, "Sod off."

Malfoy looked as if he was not done ripping into the Boy-Who-Gave-Up but slinked away as he saw Professor Sheppard step from behind his desk. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione approaching him with his wand. Ashamed, Harry could not meet her eye as he reached for his wand.

"You didn't have to go easy on me just because I'm a girl," Hermione hissed. Harry opened his mouth to apologize, but Hermione had already hustled off. Harry watched as she grabbed her belongings and raced out the door, not sparing a glance backwards.

"Don't worry about her mate, I thought you did bloody marvelous," Ron came up and clapped Harry on the back.

"It was more than marvelous! Those were some real advanced spells!" Neville came up to congratulate him along with Seamus and Dean. While they were showering him with praises, Harry still could not get rid of the embarrassment of losing and disappointing Hermione. He was dimly aware of Professor Sheppard asking for a full report of all the duels as homework and cancelling class next Thursday, but Harry was still slightly shell-shocked.

"Oh, Mr. Potter, wait here after class," Sheppard addressed him with a stern look.

As the rest of the class shuffled out of the classroom, some congratulating him and Malfoy glaring at him, Harry sawed from foot to foot as he waited for Professor Sheppard. Sheppard was shuffling around his notes as Harry waited for him to speak.

"That was an impressive display of wandless magic, Mr. Potter."

Harry's mouth inadvertently dropped open. Sheppard only confirmed what Harry had thought but his admission still caught Harry by surprise.

"Sir, I don't know what you're talkin-"

"Don't play dumb with me Potter. I saw you Summon your wand after Miss Granger had disarmed you," Professor Sheppard. Harry nodded and stared at his feet, willing himself to sink into the ground.

"Is there anything else sir?"

"Not at all Mr. Potter, I just wanted to compliment you."

Harry nodded and left the classroom, feeling more frustrated than even after he had lost the duel.

A/N: I took the liberty of using some of the HP video game spells and incorporating them into the various duels. All of these spells can be found on the [HarryPotterWiki](#). While I know it's not the most reliable source, all of the spells are somewhere on point. In the next chapter, Harry gets stuck in a hole with Neville.

QuickQuill Notes:

-A lot of Malfoy's nicknames come from Sawyer's nicknames on [Lost](#)

-Impedimenta can also be used to trip people

- Herbivicus is a spell used to create flowers and plants in an instant.

-Flipendo is a knock-back curse.

-Duro is a spell used to turn its target into stone.

-Waddiwasi was used by Lupin in PoA to send gum at Peeves. It is used in a similar manner here.

-Obscuro creates a magical blindfold.

-Ventus creates a strong blast of wind.

-Protego Maximai is just the advanced version of the shield charm.

-Are James Potter and Lily Potter Harry's parents? Yes.

Once again, any and all reviews are immensely helpful!

Summary: Someone gets another letter. Hermione holds part of a cock. Harry finds himself in a hole. Fudge harasses Dumbledore.

Harry viciously stabbed his breakfast, hoping that the depressed feeling that had settled into the pit of his stomach would finally leave him. Ever since the debacle or as Seamus liked to refer to it (The day Harry Potter got beat by a girl), Harry had been in a terribly foul mood. While Hermione had already said she had forgiven him, she retained a slightly frosty attitude towards Harry Potter. Glum with the realization that Hermione couldn't quite get over the fact that Harry had let her win, he had come to the conclusion that if was not going to enjoy life then neither was his breakfast.

Sneaking a glance to the other side of the table, he spotted Hermione seemingly lecturing her two best friends. She was gesturing animatedly at Ron who was busy crunching down the remains of his breakfast. Neville looked at the pair of them amusedly and said something which caused Hermione to fix him with a glare. Neville shut up afterwards.

Hermione looked up for a moment and met Harry's eyes. She blushed furiously and looked away quickly. Harry was caught aback by the strange turn of events and didn't notice when Ginny sat across from him. She quickly stole one of his fresh biscuits.

"Hey! My biscuit," Harry brought his plate closer to him.

"Funny, didn't see you actually eating," Ginny pointed at his other biscuit which had been mangled beyond all repair by his utensils.

"Funny, I didn't realize you were such a thief."

"Funny, I heard you lost to a girl and then moped about it for the rest of the week."

Harry glared at the youngest Weasley as she casually ate the biscuit, her eyes never leaving his.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he muttered.

"Funny, I heard that you brilliantly took down the smartest witch in the school but froze when you had to disarm her."

"Ginny, we're not playing the funny game anymore."

"Funny, why would you freeze up when you had to disarm the girl you've had a crush on for nearly forever?"

"It's not funny anymore –"

"Funny, I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact that you're a big wussy."

"Ginny, would you please....shut up."

Ginny indeed stop talking but kept her smirking face pointed towards Harry. Harry glared at her and started tucking into his breakfast, hoping that she would take the hint. She did not.

"What I really don't understand is how you suddenly became the best student in Defence," Ginny reached forward to take another biscuit from Harry's plate, but Harry smacked her hand away.

"My Dad's been teaching me," Harry answered shortly.

"Reallly now?" Ginny's eyebrows rose at Harry's comment. She was fully aware of the situation surrounding the Potter family, "When was this?"

"He came over more than usual this past summer. I know it was mostly to argue with Mum about whatever, but he took me aside and told me that he was going to help me with some of my Defence skills. Reckon he heard about the boggart."

"Ah...yes," Ginny nodded knowingly as she examined her hair for split ends.

"Mum wasn't too pleased when she finally caught us dueling each other, but I reckon she thought it was good bonding or whatever," Harry surrounded the word bonding with air quotes.

"Yes, well, your Dad really should have been giving you advice on how to ask out a girl. More specifically...that girl," Ginny pointed her lips in the general direction of the Trio.

"Thank you for being discrete," Harry said with a tinge of sarcasm.



"No problem."

Harry snuck another glance at Hermione. She was now talking rapidly to Ron, no doubt arguing about something or the other. Seeing as how Ron was holding a parchment in his hand and seemed to be repeating something that sounded like 'please', Harry surmised that Ron was trying to quickly do homework for today's Care of Magical Creatures lesson. Ron jabbed his finger at Neville, trying to coax him into helping with his quest to copy Hermione's homework. Neville simply rolled his eyes and spoke to Hermione. Hermione shook her head vehemently at the pair of them.

"You're drooling," Ginny interrupted.

"Am not," Harry tried to check the side of his mouth as discretely as possible, finding no saliva. Of course, Ginny just stared at him.

"Harry, you can't just wait for Hermione to go around and notice you. In case you haven't noticed, her hands are busy enough with those two," Ginny jabbed her thumb towards the Trio again.

"Yes, well, I'd rather have her hands busy elsewhere,"

"And that's the exact attitude that is killing you! Talk to her a bit more, be a little more forward and stop thinking with one head and start thinking with the other."

"I don't want to scare the poor girl off, besides, I like it the way it is right now," Harry took a peek at Hermione, who was quickly gathering her belongings, still staring irately at Neville and Ron.

Ginny also turned towards her older friend. Hermione was packing the last of her belongings when Ginny turned towards Harry, a devious grin on her face.

"What are you Harry, chicken?"

Harry's head snapped towards his younger friend, his jaw tight and his eyes fierce. Ginny calmly stared back at him with a hint of a smirk on her pretty face. Without another word, Harry downed his goblet of pumpkin juice, slung his bag over his shoulder and started towards Hermione.

Before he could make his advance, however, he was interrupted by a screech from the rafters. Soaring through the Great Hall was a large horned owl carrying a periwinkle blue letter. All movement in the Hall had ceased as the crowd watched the enormous owl circle above the crowd. The owl seemed to soak up the attention as it circled around the student body, picking out its target.

Harry watched as the owl began to make its descent, heading straight towards the Gryffindor table. It was coming straight towards him. Harry could feel its golden eyes staring straight into his own green eyes. The owl flashed over the Trio and kept its path towards Harry and Ginny. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see that Ginny had turned a pale sickly color.

Fortunately for Harry, the owl continued to pass over him and Harry let out a breath that he did not realize he had been holding since the owl had entered the Great Hall. There was a distinct thud as he heard the letter finally be delivered to its recipient. Turning around, Harry was mightily surprised that the recipient of the letter was Alicia Spinnet.

At first, no one could quite believe the rather unorthodox turn of events. Alicia, herself, was staring at the letter with an expression of the utmost surprise. Her two friends, Katie and Angelina, had their eyes glued on Alicia, not quite believing what had transpired. There was a loud clang as someone dropped their fork. Alicia was snapped out of her reverie and leapt off the bench, sprinting towards the Gryffindor Tower. Angelina and Katie looked at each other for one moment before they too leapt up and chased down their Quidditch teammate. Harry felt a pair of shoulders brush by him as he watched the Weasley twins take chase down the hall.

Harry sat back down; shocked that Alicia of all people would receive the letter. He always thought that there was a certain sexist belief by the Ministry that did not allow them to call up females to fight. Indeed, Alicia was the first girl in Hogwarts that received the letter that asked her to fight against You-Know-Who. Shaken with disbelief, Harry did not feel the soft tap on his shoulder until Ginny coughed loudly.

Green met brown as Harry turned to face Hermione. Her face was also pale as she stared beyond Harry, no doubt focusing her eyes on the blue letter. Without looking at him, she spoke.

"Do you think we could talk for a moment?" Hermione said airily.

"Sure," Harry gulped.

"Come on, walk with me," Hermione blinked furiously for a couple seconds as if to shut out the image of the letter, "You have Magical Creatures next right?"

"Yep."

The pair departed from the Great Hall, Harry not daring to look back at the letter.

The pair walked in silence for a couple of minutes as they made their way to Hagrid's hut. The combination of being with Hermione and the letter caused Harry to sweat more than usual. His hands were slightly clammy, fearing what Hermione had to say. As they stepped out of the castle, Hermione spoke up.

"Harry...I...well....just wanted to say that I didn't mean to snap at you. I know that you of all people wouldn't go easy on me because well....I'm a girl," Hermione stuttered out.

"Oh! No...don't worry about it...I mean...I didn't go easy on you. I just kind of...froze..." Harry finished lamely, not quite knowing how to defend his dueling pride. Internally, he was smacking himself repeatedly at his stop and go phrasing.

"I just wanted to apologize for giving you the cold shoulder. I thought you were quite adept for not dueling before," Hermione smiled weakly at him. Harry felt a small tingling ring throughout his body at her smile.

"Well, my Dad's been helping me."

"Oh."

Hermione looked at him out of the corner of her eye. Harry was confused by her rather mysterious behavior, not quite understanding why Hermione did not want to meet his eye.

"What?" he finally asked as Hagrid's hut snapped into view over the horizon.

"Oh, nothing! I just didn't know your Dad was helping you with Defence. That's very nice of him!" Hermione smiled widely now and picked up her pace.

"Yeah...it is?" Harry was even more befuddled by Hermione's quick change of moods. Jostling with the bag on his shoulder, Harry sped up to catch up with Hermione. Ginny's taunt rang in his ears as he fell into pace with Hermione and Harry took a deep breath.

"Hey Hermione, I was wondering if you wanted to go with me on the next Hogsmeade trip to get some....books."

Well that's sort of asking her out.

Hermione stopped suddenly causing Harry to almost knock her over again. It was becoming quite a habit for the pair of them. Hermione turned to him with a bright smile on her face.

"Of course!"

Harry was dumbfounded at her rather quick reply before he realized that he had finally asked Hermione out. Harry gave her an equally bright smile as his nervousness finally evaporated. The pair resumed their walking as they approached Hagrid's hut. Harry strode up to the door and knocked several times, the stupid grin still plastered on his face.

There was a bark and a crash behind the door. Harry turned to Hermione, his face still smiling but now holding more amusement. After a series of crashes punctuated by a "Get out of the way Fang!" the door finally opened.

Out stepped Hagrid, his size massively dwarfing Harry and Hermione. With a loud yell and a grin, Hagrid abruptly hugged Harry, burying the smaller boy in Hagrid's rather smelly coat. Harry, in his part, simply patted Hagrid's back, rather his side since Harry couldn't reach Hagrid's back, awkwardly.

"Harry! Early to class! Excited about today's lesson?" Hagrid beamed down at him.

"I couldn't be more excited," Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione which caused the girl to give a small snort of laughter.

"Excellent! Hermione, early too! I really shouldn't be surprised though," Hagrid lumbered around to give Hermione a hug, but the girl stepped back quickly and gave a nervous laugh.

"Oh sorry Hagrid! I spilled some juice down my robes, it's kind of sticky," Hermione laughed weakly.

"That's what she said."

Harry groaned as he eyed a slightly grinning Seamus. Hermione looked surprised for a moment before her pretty face became stormy.

"Five points from Gryffindor."

Seamus and Dean's mouths dropped open in surprise. A chorus of "Hermione!" came from the crowd of Gryffindors that had reached the hut, Neville and Ron amongst them.

"I don't want to hear it! I already gave him several warnings and it's gone past ridiculous!" Hermione walked over to Harry and stood beside him, glaring at her fellow peers. Harry's dorm mates turned to him expectantly. Harry shrugged as if to say "Sorry guys." Hermione turned to Harry and gave him a very satisfied smile. Harry smiled back weakly, one eye catching his dorm mates' furious glares.

"Come on you lot! We just have to wait for the rest of the class to get here, but in the meanwhile, everyone should put on these gloves," Hagrid brought out a box that smelled distinctly of cow dung.

"Now, we need to partner up for this one. Harry, Hermione, since you two were here first, the both of you can pair up and help me with the first one," Hagrid waved his arm to motion the pair over to the boxes. Pleased by the turn of events, Harry had no problem donning the dung smelling gloves.

"Please don't let this be what I think it is," Hermione muttered as she strode to the rattling boxes. Harry gave her a small smile as Hagrid addressed them. The small box rattled as the three of them got closer and Harry and Hermione exchanged looks of apprehension.

"You have to make sure that once I open the box, you grab the fella okay? Ready?"

Harry shrugged as if to say "Ready as I'll ever be." Hagrid nodded and cracked open the lid. Immediately, there was a squeal and a small, brown creature leaped from the box. Seeking kicking in, Harry reached out and grabbed the creature around the midsection, noting the slimy texture of the creature.

"Hermione, grab the wings!" Hagrid yelled over the squeals of the slimy creature.

Hermione yelped and reached out to awkwardly try to trap its wings against its body. After a few moments of wrestling with the wings, Hermione finally had its wings pinned against its side. Harry muttered, "Good job."

The creature's body resembled a snake except for the fact that it tiny little stubs near the tail, most likely its legs. A pair of wings was joined at the midsection, but Harry noted that the structure of the bones in the limbs did not allow the creature to fly. Harry mused that the wings were used to glide from a high location rather than lift the body off the ground.

"This is a mini - cockatrice!" Hagrid exclaimed.

Seamus looked at Harry and gave him a smirk.

"It's a cousin of the basilisk which means —"

Hagrid was unable to finish his sentence as the majority of the Gryffindors shrieked and turned away from the cockatrice. Although it was three years ago, the effects of the basilisk were fresh in their minds and they all refused to meet the cockatrice's eyes.

"Oh don't worry kids! All of their eyes are covered with films so there'll be no petrification going on here!" Hagrid gave a nervous chuckle. The students were still turned away from the creature though.

"Look," Hagrid situated himself in front of the cockatrice which was still trying to escape from its captors. He bent down to stare straight

into its eyes. Harry watched Neville give a peek to see if Hagrid had been petrified. Hagrid beamed at him and the rest of the students carefully turned around once they found the creature was safe.

"Now, who's up next!"

Twenty minutes later, twenty muddy students were trying to wrestle their cockatrice into their boxes. Harry and Hermione had gotten their creature of the day into the box and were helping Ron and Neville with their cockatrice.

"Hold it still Ron!"

"Dammit Neville, these wings are disgusting."

"Grow up Ron, just grasp it gently and – "

"No one asked you, Hermione, just because you lucked out and got cockatrice tamer Harry."

"To be fair, mine wasn't nearly as mean as this one."

"Ron, just put your arms around it and pin the wings!"

"Ron, it's slipping. It's slipping."

"Hold on, Neville, I almost got it. Just one –"

Ron was unable to finish his sentence as the cockatrice burst from its captors and raced off towards the Forbidden Forest.

"I got it!" cried both Harry and Neville. The pair gave chase to the snake/dragon combination. Harry had gotten a head start on Neville and hoped to catch it before it got lost in the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid would be quite upset if they lost one of his pets and Harry was not about to let that happen.

Just a couple more steps!

The cockatrice was about to slither around a tree but stopped suddenly and faced Harry. Harry was confused by the sudden change in demeanor but did not stop running. It was only when he

heard the distinct hissing sound from behind him that Harry paused and turned around.

It was apparent that his physical run-ins with Hermione did not teach Harry a lesson as Neville crashed into the stationary boy. As Harry held his out hand to brace his fall, he gasped as the ground suddenly gave way from beneath him.

Tumbling through the air, Harry was only mildly aware of the ground rushing up to meet him before he blacked out from the force of the impact.

Harry was dimly aware of someone tapping his shoulder. There was a dull pain in the back of his head and his body felt like he had just gone through Bludger-evasion practice.

"Harry.....you gotta wake up."

"Mmmm....schnarklefas," Harry mumbled, not ready to open his eyes.

"No, Harry. Wake UP!" the unknown assailant gave him a rough shove in the shoulder.

"I'm awake, I'm awake!" Harry sat straight up and immediately regretted it. The rush of blood to the head caused an imbalance of fluids in his head. Harry promptly lied back down.

"Well at least you're alive," said a grinning Neville Longbottom.

"Neville?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"Why the hell are you waking me up?"

"Well...we're kind of in a predicament," Neville said slowly.

Harry opened his eyes and looked up at the calm, blue sky. As he gained his depth of field though, Harry realized that he was lying down in a hole that was approximately fifteen feet deep and completely covered with dirt.



"AHHHHHHH!"

"No, calm down, calm down!"

"I'm calm, Neville. I'm CALM!"

Harry had bolted up and immediately started shaking all the dirt out of his clothes. Neville wore a slightly worried expression as he stared at the shorter boy. As Harry shook the last vestiges of dirt from his shirt, he finally took in all of his surroundings.

"What happened?"

"Uh...well...it's sort of my fault," said a sheepish Neville.

A rush of memories came back to Harry as he remembered the events that had led him to occupy a 10 x 10 dirt hole with Neville Longbottom.

"Was that you? Speaking Parseltongue?"

Neville grimaced slightly before nodding.

"Ahhh...I see. I had forgotten all about that."

Neville shrugged and tried to play it off, "I don't like being reminded of that either. I was just trying to stop the cockatrice before it got away."

"Fair point," Harry sighed, "Where are we anyways?"

"Don't know really. I reckon we're in some sort of trap seeing as how no one can hear us from above."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked as he sat back down against the dirt wall.

"Well, I heard Hermione and Ron come around the hole shortly after we fell in and I called out to them, but they didn't seem to hear me. Hermione was practically on top of us, but she didn't see us either."

Harry coughed violently.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, just some dirt in my throat."

"Here," Neville handed Harry a water bottle. Harry thanked him before taking a quick swig and handing it back to Neville.

"Handy you always keep that with you," Harry nodded towards the bottle.

"My Gran always said to keep hydrated. Kind of just stuck with me," Neville smiled sheepishly at the mention of his grandmother.

Harry nodded, unable to say anything else. Neville's grandmother had died shortly before Neville attended Hogwarts. Since Neville had inadvertently defeated You-Know-Who, the Death Eaters that still remained at large had no doubt been on the hunt for Neville. Despite all of the protection that Harry had heard Neville received, it did not stop the Death Eaters from locating Neville's grandmother and killing her. They were sadly merciful as they had not subjected Neville's grandmother to the torture curse, unlike Frank and Alice Longbottom. Frank and Alice Longbottom were killed shortly after they were tortured. It was another aspect of Neville's life that Harry did not envy.

"It's probably charmed," Harry pointed upwards.

"How so?" Neville's eyebrows came together at his question.

"Hagrid once told me that centaurs set up traps in the Forbidden Forest for game and food. This hole's probably enchanted so that whatever falls in is trapped and no one can hear or see it. So either someone gets clever and finds us or we wait it out for the centaurs," Harry reasoned.

"So how long do we have to wait?" Neville said after a moment.

"Hagrid didn't specify," Harry finished darkly. Neville nodded once before getting comfortable. He looked at Harry and smiled.

"Best get comfortable then."

Harry agreed with the taller boy and shifted around until he was nicely settled in his pile of dirt. The two boys exchanged slight small talk to pass the time as the sun drifted from view, no longer beating down on them. Once or twice they heard someone pass by and they had called out for help each time, but it was to no avail. It was only about an hour later that they heard someone clearly.

"There you go boy, have some food..."

"Who is it this time you think?" Harry asked.

"Looks like you and your friends are taking Wednesdays seriously now...."

"It sounds like..." Neville had the name on the tip of his tongue but couldn't quite figure it out just yet.

"I wonder if you've seen your friends? Those Crumple-Horned Snorkacks..."

"Luna," they both said.

"Oh yes, they told me too. Bad things on the horizon..."

"LUNA!" the pair of them yelled, hopefully catching her attention.

"Oh no, post-Nargles. Although, I suppose that some things should happen during the Nargles mating season as well..."

"Oh it's no use. No one can hear us," Harry said despondently.

"You never know. It is Luna," Neville said with a slight smile on his face.

"Good point," Harry smirked back.

"LUNA!"

"Father says that we must do this..."

"Here Harry, get on my shoulders and maybe you can poke your head out there."

"Father also says that when the time comes, it will all go away..."

"Almost got it Neville....just a little bit more."

"Though I'm starting to have my doubts..."

"OW!"

Harry had finally reached the top of the ditch, standing on Neville's shoulders. As he did so, however, there was a loud snap as he tried to reach for the ledge. The sharp burning sensation in his hand caused him to jump in surprise which in turn caused Neville to lose his balance and send both boys tumbling down to the floor of the hole once again.

"What happened? Are you alright?" Neville asked as he rubbed his head.

"Yeah...I think it's charmed. Smart, I suppose, so nothing in here gets out," Harry rubbed his hand with equal vigor.

"Did you hear that?"

Harry and Neville froze and looked at each other before returning to their cries of, "LUNA!"

"Must have been a stray Humdinger. Let's go see if we can find it..."

Luna's footfalls drifted away from the hole. Harry and Neville sat back down despondently.

"Clever creatures them Centaurs," Neville mumbled, gazing towards the ledge where Harry had hurt his hand.

"Hermione would be proud," Harry said with a rueful smile.

"Yes she would," Neville said with a ghost of a smile on his face as well. Harry took the time to ponder his dorm mate. While they weren't particularly the best of friends that Ron and Neville were, Harry believed that they were still good friends. Neville had come to Harry's birthday party when he turned to ten so they had some connections. At Hogwarts, however, Neville was so caught up in his

adventures that there was never really a time where Harry and Neville were together exclusively.

Now we're both stuck in a hole for who knows how long.

"I've been meaning to tell you Harry. Great job during the duels," Neville gave him a thumbs up from across the dirt hole.

"Thanks. My Dad's been teaching me so I was a lot better than last time you saw me," Harry joked.

"Is he now?" Neville said curiously, looking away.

"Yes...he is," Harry eyed suspiciously. It was the second time that day that he had received a curious comment after he had told them of his Dad's lessons.

"That's good then," Neville nodded, still not meeting Harry's eyes.

"I suppose it is," Harry said, looking directly at the taller boy. He did not press the issue, however. If Neville kept it to himself, then he had a good reason. Hermione, on the other hand, would be thoroughly interrogated.

Maybe after our date though.

At this point, Harry sat up. He realized that there were some things that needed to be said to Neville and Ron before he took Hermione out on her date. While he was not completely aware if either of the pair had feelings for her, there would be less complications if Harry confronted both of them. Although Harry was fearful of Neville's reaction, he was determined to speak about the issue. Just as he was about to speak, however, Neville finally turned to look at him which caused Harry to choke on his own saliva.

"Harry? Harry? You alright? Here, take the rest of my water," Neville handed Harry the water bottle, which he accepted graciously.

"I was just going to say..." Harry unfortunately fell in another coughing fit. Neville looked at him concernedly as Harry collected himself.

"I was just going to say...you did a great job yourself," Harry mumbled the last part.

"Oh, why thanks," Neville said with a puzzled smile. Harry just shrugged back in response and drank the water to cover up his red face.

So much for that.

As Harry was finishing his water, he heard more footsteps. Neville had heard them too and sprang up, hopeful to attract some of the attention their way.

"I implore you Dumbledore...we need more students," said a slightly recognizable voice.

"Minister, your Ministry has already taken enough students as it is. At this rate, there will be no one to teach at Hogwarts," Dumbledore said in an unusually clipping voice.

"But we need them. You said it yourself; we MUST stop You-Know-Who!" Minister Fudge pleaded.

"But not at the expense of students' lives Minister. We must try to keep them here and protected," Dumbledore said calmly.

Harry and Neville were so entranced by the conversation that they forgot to call for help. After a moment, Neville broke out of his trance-like state and cupped his hands in front of his mouth.

"Professor Dumbledore!"

Albus Dumbledore did not appear to hear the Boy-Who-Lived and kept walking with Minister Fudge. As they approached the hole though, they appeared to stop as the sound of their footsteps suddenly vanished.

"What are you playing at Dumbledore? You know we need these students. Why keep them here? They can learn out in the field as well," Fudge said with more than a hint of suspicion.

"Not everything can be learned through fighting, Minister," Dumbledore said, his unnerving calm restored.

There was a pause in their conversation. Harry cupped his hands in front of his mouth and shouted for Dumbledore as well but received the same non-response that Neville received.

"I know what you're playing at Dumbledore," Fudge accused.

"I have no clue what you're talking about Minister," Harry could practically see Dumbledore's twinkling eyes.

"You may have fooled the Wizengamot, but you have not fooled me! You're out to make your own mercenary army aren't you? That's why you won't let any Aurors near Hogwarts!" Fudge was wailing now.

"Minister, I ensure you, I have no intentions of making an army out of my students," Dumbledore replied.

"That's bloody rubbish and you know it."

Harry's eyebrows shot up at the sound of the Minister's cursing.

"On the contrary, Minister, I just want to keep my students safe from any...harm."

"Hmph, we'll see about this Dumbledore."

"I have no doubts about it."

The sound of fading footsteps indicated that they too were leaving the forest without finding the two boys stuck in the hole. Harry and Neville sank back down into their seating positions, each of them enveloped with their own thoughts.

"That was a doozy. You don't think Fudge would actually send Aurors or Dementors up here do you?" Harry recalled his Third Year when Dementors were sent to Hogwarts for Ministry-deemed protection.

"Not Dementors I reckon, but who knows about those Aurors," Neville rubbed his chin looking deep in thought.

"Glad Dumbledore's here to set the record straight," Harry said.

"Me too."

A silence fell over them as the rays of light grew dimmer and dimmer. It was nearly dinner time and Harry could not quite figure out why there was not some sort of search party. After asking Neville, he found out that there was quite a crowd around their area when Harry was knocked out, but they had since left. The light grew dimmer and dimmer until there was only a soft, red glow in their ditch. Harry and Neville talked about what their plans would be when the Centaurs found them, but they were interrupted by a loud hoot.

They both looked up to see Harry's white owl, Hedwig, perched on top of their hole, pecking at the seemingly invisible ground.

"Genius!" Harry exclaimed as he stood, his knees creaking from all the standing and sitting.

"You sure this will work?"

"Owls have an uncanny sense of finding their target, Ron. I'm sure this will work...at least I think so."

Harry was never gladder to hear Hermione's bossy tone. It was ethereal music to his rather dirt-covered ears. Neville looked just as happy to hear his friends as well.

Hermione and Ron emerged into view, standing right where the opening of their hole was. They seemed to be walking on thin air, but Harry mused that they were probably standing over a pile of dirt.

"She seems to have stopped here," Ron said as he poked at the ground.

"Stand back, Ron," Hermione brandished her wand as Hedwig hopped out of the way and Ron stepped back.

"Reducto!"

Harry met Neville's eyes a split second before Hermione cast her spell.



"Protego!" said Harry as he deflected the mountain of dirt that fell on them. It could not quite catch the avalanche of grass, however, and the resulting weeds covered both Harry and Neville.

"Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry!" Harry could dimly hear Hermione profusely apologizing.

After a couple of moments and a few swear words, Harry and Neville were finally wrenched out of their prison. As they were busy dusting the dirt off their robes, Hermione and Ron explained to them that the whole school had been looking for them all day. When the Minister found out that the Boy-Who-Lived had disappeared, he had called an army of Aurors to invade the castle and find Neville. Hermione finally had the bright idea of using Harry's owl to find him.

As Harry ruffled the grass out of his hair, Hermione tackle hugged Neville.

"Thank Merlin you're alright! We thought...you know...him..." Hermione said.

"Oh don't worry about it Hermione. Just Harry torturing me instead," Neville joked and gave Harry a smile.

"Oi!" Harry laughed. He turned around to pat the dirt out of his jeans and was surprised when Hermione gave him an equally ferocious hug.

"I'm glad you're okay too Harry."

"Th-th-thanks," Harry stammered. He was glad it had become dark. The darkness served to cover the blush that had risen to his face when Hermione hugged him.

"I'm okay too, Hermione," Ron joked with a huge grin

"You prat," Hermione disengaged from Harry and smacked Ron in the shoulder. Harry, on his part, was still on cloud nine from Hermione's hug.

"Oh, Harry! Your parents are here. I've been talking to them for the better part of the hour," Hermione said with a coy smile on her face.

"Just pleasant."

A/N: Although JKR said Neville was a short, blonde boy, I used movie-Neville's appearance so it's easier to differentiate the two boys. The cockatrice is indeed a mythical creature which is a cousin of a basilisk. It exists in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and I just changed them up a bit here. Sorry if there are some spelling and typo errors, I had to crunch this one out before exam time.

QuickQuill notes:

- Pop Culture References: *The Office*, *Back to the Future*.
- Fudge has just a little more backbone in this AU than in canon.
- Hermione's interpretation of Harry's invitation might be a little different than what Harry thinks it is.
- Aurors abound do not make a happy Hogwarts.
- More of Luna will be revealed.

Disclaimer: I have nothing, nothing, nothinggg! If I don't...have...

I own none of these characters. They all belong to JKR.

Summary: Lucius scolds Draco. Harry and Hermione are in a broom closet. James and Lily scold Harry. Draco overhears Harry overhearing Trio business.

Trudging up the bending slopes of Hogwarts grounds, Harry grumbled upon the fact that his parents had come to Hogwarts. While a small part of him was pleased that they were there together, the growing teenager within him knew that there would be more than one embarrassing moment while Lily and James Potter were at Hogwarts. He was prepared to handle the numerous jokes that his Dad would make about his rather unfortunate situation and for the unrelenting fuss his mother would make.

Harry was not prepared for the group of Aurors that confronted the quartet as they approached the castle. The group of Aurors approached the teenagers with an air of strict authority. Each of the Aurors was clad in robes of deep black. Clasped at the neck, the robes gave the Aurors an almost Dementor-like impression. Nothing from their body was visible and if it were not for their slightly shrouded heads, they could have easily been mistaken for Dementors. They made no footsteps as they walked towards Harry and seem unarmed but upon further inspection, Harry noted that there was a little stub of wood that extended slightly from the sleeves of their robes.

"Neville Longbottom," the lead Auror stated as he approached the group.

"Err...yes?" Neville answered warily with a raise of one eyebrow.

"We have been instructed to escort you to Professor Dumbledore's office as soon as you were found," the lead Auror stated bluntly. Harry found their unwillingness to move slightly unnerving. It was as if the slightest movement on their part would certainly have a rather dismal ending.

Neville looked at his friends to survey their responses while the Aurors stood motionless. Ron and Harry simply shrugged at him

while Hermione gave him a small nudge in the shoulder and whispered, "Go with them."

Shrugging, Neville said, "Alright."

As he stepped forward however, the lead Auror held out one palm to impede Neville's progress.

"We must identify you."

"I am...Neville Longbottom," Neville stated plainly. There was a slight pause and Harry could almost hear the Auror sigh.

"We need to verify you are who you say you are. Same with you Harry Potter," the Auror's head under the hood of his cloak turned ever so slightly towards Harry. The other four Aurors mirrored his action. Harry gulped loudly at the rather authoritarian action.

Just as the lead Auror was about to speak, the Auror furthest in the back spoke up, "What is your Patronus Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville smiled at the feminine voice and responded, "A lion."

"It's him," the female Auror turned her head ever so slightly to address the lead Auror. Without turning around, the lead Auror nodded and turned his attention towards Harry. Once again, all of the other Aurors mimicked his action. The lead Auror retrieved a piece of parchment from within his robes and began reading its contents.

"Mr. Potter, what is the name of the fluffy bunny in your room?" the Auror asked without a trace of humor.

Harry immediately burned red from embarrassment, knowing exactly who had written his identification question. There was a snort, a cough, and a sigh behind him and Harry fought the urge to sink into the ground.

"Lori."

The lead Auror nodded at Harry's response and turned to discuss something with the other Aurors. Harry turned around to address a sniggering Ron, a coughing Neville, and a smiling Hermione.

"It's not a real bunny. It's just a drawing. My Dad drew it to for me when I was little and my Mom put it up in my room. I guess I've never really bothered to take it down. I swear it's not like that..." Harry hurriedly explained.

"No one's judging you Harry," Ron said with an enormous smirk on his freckled face.

"Ron shut up. I think it's quite cute Harry," Hermione threw Ron a glare but turned to smile at Harry. Harry thanked her with a rather embarrassed smile of his own.

Ron snorted and stared amusedly at Hermione, "Since when do you think things are cute?"

"Am I not allowed to think things are cute?" Hermione stared at Ron evenly but noticed that her jaw was ticking ever so slightly. Harry knew it was a warning sign. Ron's smile was wiped off his face and it was Harry's turn to smirk at him.

"That's not what...I meant," Ron struggled to find the right words to appease the almost growling Hermione.

"Excuse us, but Mr. Longbottom, you need to come with us," the Aurors had finished their impromptu meeting. Shrugging, Neville bade the trio good-bye and trudged up the steps of Hogwarts, the lead Auror in front of him and two Aurors flanking him on either side.

"What I meant to say is that cute isn't a word that you would normally use to describe something," Ron looked pleased with himself as they resumed their walk.

"Is it because cute is an effeminate word and I'm not a girl?" Hermione was gearing up towards full-blown lecture mode.

"Never said that, your assumptions go too far," Ron said triumphantly. Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Harry laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Hermione, do you know where my parents are?" Harry quickly headed off the incoming argument.

With one last glare at Ron, Hermione said, "I'll take you to them Harry."

Ron smiled at getting the last word in versus Hermione and stuck a tongue out at her while her back was turned. Harry rolled his eyes and suppressed a smile.

"Well, while you take Harry to his parents, I'm going to eat some dinner. Saving the two of you interrupted quite an important time for me," Ron turned down the hallway leading to the Great Hall without another word. As Ron left earshot, Hermione whirled around to face Harry with an upset look on her face.

"Can you believe him? Who knows what might have happened to you two and all he's worrying about is dinner!" Harry almost laughed at the cute way Hermione shook her head when she was agitated but thought better about it.

"It's just his way of coping with things. The only time you'll ever see him somber is if Gryffindor or the Canons lose a Quidditch match," Harry reasoned.

"I suppose you're right, doesn't make me any happier though," Hermione crossed her arms and stared mutinously at her shoes. Feeling bold, Harry placed a slightly shaking hand on her shoulder which caused Hermione to look at him.

"Why don't you just take me to my parents? I'm sure Ron will be less insufferable after he has some food in that bottomless pit he calls his stomach," Harry smiled at her.

"How right you are. Come on," Hermione said with a knowing smile on her face. Hermione couldn't see the grin on Harry's face as he followed her to his parents. The grin vanished however when Hermione spoke.

"So what's this about Malfoy being at your tenth birthday party?"

Harry groaned and proceeded to tell her how Draco Malfoy fully embarrassed Harry at his own birthday party.

Twenty-three minutes, six staircases, and two flights later, Harry and Hermione were leaning against a wall adjacent to the gargoyle

guarding the Headmaster's office. The pair surmised that the meeting between Neville and the Headmaster was occurring at the time and the gargoyle would not let them disturb it. Unfortunately, Harry's parents were also supposed to be with the Headmaster and so, the pair of teenagers found themselves waiting for the gargoyle to reveal the staircase which leads to the Headmaster's office.

Harry, for his part, had been curiously quiet since Hermione had guessed the situation. He knew that his parents cared for him, but their being in the Headmaster's office at this moment did not infuse Harry with much happiness. He grinded his teeth, upset at the fact that for some inexplicable reason, his parents had chosen to first see Neville before seeing their son. He did not confess any of these thoughts to Hermione, who was diligently counting the minutes that had passed by in her head.

"You don't have to stay here, you know. I can wait for them on my own," Harry lightly joked, staring at her from the corner of his eye. He saw Hermione smile and pat him on the shoulder.

"No worries Harry, I was going to wait here for Neville anyways."

"Of course," Harry barely held in a sigh.

Harry stared at the gargoyle's grotesque face, the silence periodically broken by Hermione's light tapping of her foot. Hermione's explanation for staying with Harry only added to the rather sour turn of events since they arrived at the foot of the tower. Since he had been rather shy when he grew up, he was not exactly the most adept at creating small talk to fill silent spaces such as the one between him and Hermione. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Hermione twirling her wand between her index and middle finger repeatedly. It was an action she performed when she was deep in thought.

Quite a stalker I am.

Hermione's tapping foot paused as she heard other footsteps ascending the staircases. Harry turned his head to face the clatter of footsteps and soft murmur of voices rising into the air. As the footsteps neared, Harry noted a distinct clunk within the series of footsteps.

I know I've heard that noise before.

As he wracked his brain for the source of the clunk, he was startled and abruptly pulled into a nearby broom closet. Harry noted that there seemed to be an abundance of storage space for a magical school.

"Hermione, what the – "

"Shhhh," Hermione placed a slender finger against his lips to shush him while she peered through the shutters of the broom closet.

Harry froze as he felt Hermione's finger on his lips. He was dimly aware of his heart quickening and his blood racing to different parts of his body, but all he could concentrate on was the beautiful finger held against his lips. Hermione would surely be arrested for having such soft, perfect skin. His reverie was broken, however, when Hermione pulled her finger away from his lips and leaned towards the door. Confused and saddened by Hermione's actions, Harry did the only thing appropriate for the event and leaned towards the door as well.

"How is Mother?" Harry heard the muffled voice of a young teenager.

"Fine as always Draco, inviting whatever half-wit bint that will listen to her incessant gossip of grossly unnecessary things," the presumed father drawled. It was at that moment that Harry realized that the clunking sound was the sound of Lucius Malfoy's cane.

"Malfoy?" Harry mouthed to Hermione for confirmation. Hermione nodded in response and placed her fingers against her own lips in a shushing motion. For a fleeting moment, Harry was immensely jealous of her lips.

"I see, Father. Was it really necessary for you to come today?" Draco presumably asked.

The sound of footsteps stopped for a moment as the father and son apparently stopped right in front of their broom closet. Harry looked at Hermione as if she had the answer to the sudden stop. Hermione shrugged back in response.

"Why the questions Draco?" elder Malfoy spoke slowly.



"I was just curious, Father," said an uncharacteristically shy Malfoy.

"Hmmm," Harry could almost imagine the aristocratic raising of the nose that the Malfoys were known for, "Curiosity does not beget a properly raised gentleman Draco. I would advise you to be less...curious."

Lucius Malfoy's tone was decisively cold. Harry could practically feel the whispers of warning emanating from the elder Malfoy.

"Of course, Father."

"To answer your question, however, the Minister has requested my presence for Longbottom's apparent disappearance. He seems to think that the old coot is somehow involved the young Longbottom in his so called...army," the footsteps started and stopped within Lucius' explanation. Harry thought they must have stopped at the gargoyle.

"Trust me, Father, Longbottom and his friends aren't making an army of any sort," Draco snorted.

"Did I ask for your opinion?"

"No, but since when have you ever," the last part was almost whispered and if it were not for the silence in the corridor, Harry could not have heard it. Harry did hear the resulting consequence of the young Malfoy's cheek.

CRACK!

The loud crack in the corridor caused Hermione to jump and clutch Harry's arm. Under normal circumstances, this action would have no doubt caused the same emotions that were usually invoked when physical contact with Hermione was involved. This time, however, Harry could only strain his neck as he horrifyingly waited for what would happen next. He could tell from the distinct sound of wood hitting flesh that the elder Malfoy had no doubt hit Draco with his cane.

"I see you haven't lost any of your...insolence," Lucius Malfoy spoke without any emotion. Harry could only hear what he assumed to be Draco hissing in pain.

"Maybe a visit to the dungeons is in order?"

"That won't be necessary, Father."

"We shall see."

Harry could see Hermione's wide eyes in his peripheral. Harry, himself, could not quite believe the harsh treatment that Draco had received from his father. While Harry might have his own problems with his father, the seemingly abusive nature in which Lucius treated Draco was by far a worst situation.

"Be gone. The Minister is expecting me."

"Yes, Father."

The soft ruffle of robes that passed by their broom closet indicated that Malfoy had left the hallway. Hermione finally let go her death grip on Harry's arm for which Harry was quite thankful. Enraptured by the conversation between father and son, Harry had barely felt the lack of circulation in his upper arm. From the shutters, Harry could see Lucius Malfoy procure his wand from the head of the cane and whisper an incantation. A silvery jackal erupted from the tip of his wand and raced through the gargoyle. Harry noted it was a rather clever trick to reach the Headmaster. After a few moments, the gargoyle stepped out of the way and Lucius Malfoy disappeared up the staircase to the Headmaster's office. Once the gargoyle had stepped back into place, Harry and Hermione exited the broom closet, making sure that no one saw them exiting together.

"Wow," Harry looked at Hermione with an expression of utmost disbelief.

"Wow is an understatement. Makes me almost feel bad for Malfoy," Harry arched an eyebrow at Hermione's statement, "I said almost."

"Kind of shows why he is the way he is," Harry rubbed his upper arm.

"There's no doubt his parents had a strong influence in his behavior. I just never thought that this would be how it affected him," Hermione wrapped her arms around her, shivering slightly.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked in concern.

"I'm fine. Just slightly disturbed," Hermione wrapped her arms tightly around her. Harry did not know whether he should have given her some sort of physical comfort so he settled for shifting awkwardly from foot to foot.

"What do you think they're discussing up there?" Harry discussed after a moment's pause, trying to push the recent memory out of his mind.

"The Minister is probably being as paranoid as normal. He'll ask Neville to join his army no doubt," Hermione worriedly chewed her bottom lip.

"He's asked Neville that?"

"Twice already," Hermione nodded.

"And Lucius Malfoy is up there because..." Harry trailed off.

"Fudge is in his pocket. Fudge will listen to whatever Malfoy has to say. Ironic I think," Hermione said the last part mostly to herself.

"If you ask me, Malfoy's no doubt a Death Eater."

"No evidence," Hermione shook her head, "But Dumbledore knows all of this already. He'll help."

"Of course."

Their conversation was abruptly ended by the sound of the gargoyle hopping away from the entrance. The elder Malfoy filed out without as much as a glance towards the pair. Not far behind him was Cornelius Fudge in his bowler hat, engrossed in a conversation with a toad-looking woman that Harry did not recognize. After the pair of Ministry officials, a harassed looking Neville emerged from the staircase.

"Neville! How are you? What did Fudge want? You didn't say yes did you? What did Mr. Malfoy want?" Hermione rushed forward and hugged her friend while firing question after question at him.

"Leave the poor boy alone Hermione! He's already had enough questioning as it is," said a voice from behind Neville.

Out stepped a dark-haired, brown-eyed wizard who bore an obvious resemblance to the dark-haired, green-eyed wizard who had been waiting outside of the Headmaster's office for nearly half an hour. His hair was wind-swept and dirty as if James Potter had not taken a shower for quite a while. Harry noted the grime and dirt collected at the edge of his father's robes as well as the heavy bandage wrapped around his left hand.

"Dad! What happened to your hand?" Harry's animosity towards his parents was temporarily forgotten in light of his father's apparent injuries.

"Harry!" James Potter paid no mind to Harry's worry and simply pulled him in a hug. While Harry appreciated the fatherly token of appreciation, he wrinkled his nose at the rather unkempt smell that arose from his father's robes.

"You smell like Hagrid after a run," Harry grinned at his father.

"Now that's a little uncalled for don't you think?" James said with an air of injured innocence.

"Obviously you've been around yourself for far too long."

"Too true," said a voice from behind Harry's father. Harry beamed at his mom who gave an equally genuine smile as she hugged her only son. After Harry left his mother's embrace, he was immediately smacked in the shoulder by her.

"OW!" Harry rubbed his already numb shoulder. Any further blood loss from that particular shoulder would no doubt lead to a rather unnecessary amputation.

"That's for disappearing for hours," Lily Potter clucked her tongue at her son.

"Mrs. Potter, it was mostly my fault," Neville said.

"Both of you are in need of lessons in avoiding danger," Lily gave a slightly stricken look towards both boys.

"I think what your mother means, Harry – Neville, is that the next time you get in trouble, make sure you leave a note before you go," James Potter winked at the pair of them.

"Which is not what I mean at all. Things are already bad enough with that ridiculous Fudge constantly harassing you kids. It would be wise not to give him any incentive to take any of you out of Hogwarts," Lily gave a pointed look to the three students. Harry knew that his mom was an expert in the art of guilt-tripping.

"Just hot air Lily," James said with a roll of his eyes. Harry chuckled at his father's petulance which caused his mother to fix him with a stern glare. Harry immediately topped laughing.

"It's hot air until you get one of those horrible letters."

"She's got you there Dad," Harry shrugged defeat.

His mother was very insistent on the topic of his school mates fighting for the Ministry. Ever since the first letters had arrived at Hogwarts, his mother had seemingly taken a crusade in trying to revoke the law which approved the recruitment of students. While Harry would have normally been embarrassed by his mother's public appeal, he admired her bravery in the face of a rather disconcerting body of people.

"Fighting for those Aurors can't be that bad. The group that walked me up here was pretty cool," Neville piped into the family affair. James and Lily exchanged a look before James addressed the Boy-Who-Lived.

"It's not fighting with the Aurors that's the bad part, Neville. You kids are too..." James glanced at Lily, "...young for this."

"I'd fight with my friends, even if what the Ministry is doing is wrong," Harry looked to Neville and Hermione for support. They both grimly nodded, agreeing with his statement. Once again, Harry's mother and father exchanged a loaded glance.

"Harry...and this goes for all of you," Lily started, "If you get one of those letters, you tell us first okay?"

"Well what are you going to do? It's not as if I would say no to fighting You-Know-Who," Harry muttered rebelliously, almost forgetting that Hermione and Neville were there.

"Harry, you will tell us if you get a letter," James fixed his son with an uncharacteristically stern glance. Harry glanced between the serious look on his father's face and the commanding yet worried look on his mother's face. The animosity to his parents returned in full force.

"Fine."

There was a terribly awkward moment in which the five people in the hallway shuffled awkwardly.

"Mr. Potter, Mrs. Potter, do you want to get dinner with us in the Great Hall? I'm sure Dumbledore wouldn't object," Hermione spoke up. Harry thanked her with his eyes and Hermione responded with a slight nod.

"I would love to, but I should really get going," James Potter rubbed the back of his neck as he awkwardly shifted from foot to foot. Harry steadfastly stared at the dirt on his shoes. He could practically feel the glare from his mother to his father.

"Just business stuff and all Harry," James said quietly. Lily sniffed at his rather weak explanation.

"Of course, Dad. I'll see you around Christmas?" Harry asked without looking up.

"Of course, kiddo. I'll be there a little earlier this year."

"Okay."

Harry looked up and saw his father's crestfallen face. As much as he hated him at this moment, he was still his father. He quickly recalled Malfoy's father and knew that he would not trade places with the blonde for all the Galleons in the world.

"I'll see you at Christmas, Dad," Harry gave him a small smile. James nodded and gave his son a quick man hug.

"Lily."

"James."

The pair nodded at each other before James Potter left the hallway. Harry could see Neville staring anywhere but Harry and his mom while Hermione looked pensive as she watched the retreating back of Harry's father.

"Well come on now Harry. I am rather famished," Lily Potter smiled at her son. Hermione and Neville lead the way to the Great Hall while Harry hung a pace back with his mother.

"Mom."

"Yes Harry?"

"Please refrain from embarrassing stories around my friends," Harry said in an effort to lighten the suddenly damper mood.

"I'll try to limit it to stories without diapers."

Hours after his mother had departed Hogwarts, Harry found himself patrolling the corridors with the last person he wanted to see. It seemed as if Fate had different plans for Harry that night.

Draco Malfoy tapped his wand against his robe as he walked a good five feet from Harry. During one of his first patrols with Malfoy, the blonde had set up rules that generally kept the two from causing bodily harm to each other.

Rule #1: At no time will you walk within four feet of me. I have heard from various credible sources that stupidity is contagious.

Rule #2: At no point will you ask me how my life is. My life is perfect.

Rule #3: On the occasion we find a stupid miscreant, I will handle all the point deducting duties.

Rule #4: When and if we encounter a person and/or creature with malicious intent, you will step forward to deal with the hostile. I feel as if you would make a great probe so I learn its weaknesses and defeat it with ease.

Rule #5: You will address me as Lord Malfoy.

Harry had the crumpled piece of parchment buried deep within his drawers in his dorm. He also steadfastly refused to abide by rules #3 and #5. Malfoy, for his part, accepted Harry's selective choosing of the rules and seemed content with their arrangement. Unbeknownst to Malfoy, Harry was suddenly nervous around the young Malfoy after witnessing the rather severe punishment for his cheek. He felt as if he were to burst his secret at any moment to the blonde, confessing that he had seen the sins of his father and understood the pains and suffering. Harry doubted that Malfoy would understand though.

So Harry kept silent as they marched through the upper floors of Hogwarts castle. Malfoy would periodically sneer in Harry's general direction when he thought that he had not done something malicious in the past half hour. Harry did not respond with his usual glare but simply stared back at the blonde. This action seemed to unnerve the Slytherin which caused his sneers to be less frequent as time wore on.

As Harry and Draco passed by the library, Harry spotted a dim light from behind one of the book cases. With a soft "Pssst", Harry tilted his head towards the dull light. Malfoy spotted the source of light and brought out his wand.

"You can take this one if you want," Harry whispered.

"How very nice of you Potter," Malfoy whispered back, "I don't like it. Why don't you take it?"

Harry rolled his eyes at Malfoy's turnabout. He recalled Hermione's words from earlier that day. He almost felt sorry for the Slytherin.

Harry approached the book case softly, his feet barely touching the ground as he quietly made his way to the disturbance in the library. As he got closer, he heard the soft murmur of voices, noting that



there were two males and one female. As he closed in on the target, he realized he recognized the owners of those voices.

Cursing, Harry could not help himself as he surreptitiously inched a book from its original spot so he could see through the book case. His suspicions were confirmed as a spot of blonde, red, and ginger hair were bent over a book on the desk. Harry tried to get closer to the bookshelf as he struggled to hear their conversation.

"Look! It says right here. Prophecies can only be picked up from those who it is meant for. I told you I knew," Ron said.

"Doesn't change the fact that we can't even get into the Hall of Prophecies. That's in the Department of Mysteries, so feel free to get all of us a ticket in there, Ron," Hermione shot back.

"No need to be a snit about it. I never said I could get in there, I just knew that Neville can touch the prophecy," Ron reasoned.

"Both of you just...stop for a second?" Neville rubbed his forehead as he stared down at the book.

"Why is Voldemort," Ron, Harry, and Hermione grimaced, "thinking about a prophecy about me?"

"Maybe that's his secret weapon?" Ron asked.

"Ridiculous. Divination is an unreliable branch of magic at best. I'd be willing to bet that not even half of those prophecies come true," Hermione scoffed.

"It's not the Hall of Trelawney Hermione. It's the bloody Hall of Prophecies. Those things do come true!" Ron rolled his eyes at the brunette. Hermione did not respond and instead resolutely glared at Ron.

"Well it's heavily guarded right? Department of Mysteries and all?" Neville asked.

"My Dad told me that not even the Unspeakables know everything in the Department of Mysteries," Ron said.

"Well then let's just keep this thing to ourselves for now. Fudge was already breathing down my neck at the meeting and he's probably got his little Auror spies embedded in this place. Not to mention Malfoy and that lady would not stop looking at me as if I were some nasty piece of meat. Dumbledore wouldn't make eye contact with me during our meeting so there's no point in telling him. Next Hogsmeade visit, I'll tell Padfoot and Moony to meet up with us and we can tell them what all of this means," Neville planned out.

"Are you sure we shouldn't just tell Dumbledore?" Hermione chewed on her bottom lip.

"No – I – just don't think it's a good idea right now," Neville stuttered.

"Sounds like a plan to me then," Ron clapped Neville on the shoulder. The pair looked expectantly at Hermione.

"Oh fine. I'm meeting up with Harry to buy some books and then I'll meet with the rest of you after."

"Wait, you're meeting with Harry...to buy books?" Ron asked slowly. Neville also looked at Hermione with strange curiosity.

Harry heard someone snicker beside him and turned to see that Malfoy was also peering through a hole in the bookshelf. Malfoy smirked at him and waggled his eyebrows, no doubt mocking Harry's mock date. Thankfully, Malfoy did not the conditions in which Harry asked Hermione to Hogsmeade.

"Yes, Ron. Unlike you, Harry takes an interest in his studies," Hermione sniffed haughtily.

"If by interest, you mean he's a bit boring. Come on, it's Harry," Ron said. Harry rolled his eyes at Ron's response. He had heard enough late night talks in the dorm room to surmise what the rest of the dorm thought of him.

"Beat you in a duel though didn't he?" Hermione replied with a lace of venom in her voice.

Again, Malfoy snorted beside Harry. Try as he might, Harry could not bring himself to do the right thing and confront the Trio and stop

the snooping. Harry was dying to hear what they had to say about him.

"So you're just meeting with Harry to buy books?" Neville asked benignly.

"Yes, yes, and I'll meet with you after Neville," Hermione sighed at having to explain herself again.

"All right," Neville said slowly, "We should get going."

The other two teenagers nodded in agreement as they closed a set of books that had collected on the table. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Malfoy straighten his robes and look to confront the Trio.

"Malfoy, no!" Harry whispered urgently. It was no use though as Malfoy stepped out from behind the bookshelf.

"Well, well, well, look what we have here. Three kids out from curfew hours," Malfoy drawled as he leaned against the side of the bookshelf.

The Trio froze as they assessed the situation. Malfoy had clearly caught them beyond curfew hours and while Hermione was a prefect, there would be no way to escape this conundrum. They did not count on Harry stepping out from behind the bookshelf as well.

"Harry! How long have you been here?" Ron squeaked.

"We just got here Weasley," Malfoy smirked at the redhead. Harry fixed him with a glance, but Malfoy did not respond. He simply stared coolly at Ron.

"Shut up Malfoy, why don't you just – oh my Merlin – what the hell happened to your face? Did someone push you down the stairs?" Ron ogled the shiner on Malfoy's cheek. Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance.

"No Weasley, I tripped over your ineptitude," Malfoy snapped back.

"That looks awful. What'd you do? Lose a fight?" Ron continued.

"Yes, to a five hundred ton troll who had three heads and a club for an arm. Now will you just shut up so I can deduct points from you!" Malfoy grew even more agitated to Ron's pleasure.

"Five points each from all of you!" Malfoy smiled in satisfaction.

Neville and Ron looked to Harry for help to which he could only shrug again. Hermione knew better than to rebuke Malfoy. She was well versed in the rules established since You-Know-Who's rising.

"We'll just get going then," Hermione said quietly.

"You do that Granger," Malfoy leered at her as the Trio quietly slipped by Malfoy. Each of them nodded at Harry sympathetically. Harry offered each of them an apologetic smile as if to say, "I wish I could help."

After they were out of range, Harry turned to Malfoy and asked him, "Why did you cover for me?"

Malfoy shrugged and grinned deviously, "Because now you owe me one."

"Don't look too shocked Potter, it's our little secret," Malfoy brushed past him and exited the library.

Somehow, Harry did not feel the least bit comforted that he and Malfoy shared a secret.

A/N: The title is inspired from a similarly named Lost episode. The Aurors are made to look like the Rangers of the North from Lord of the Rings except in black.

QuickQuill Notes:

-References: Lost, 24.

-A nice little tidbit in here for anyone who's ready my other story "My Name is..."

-Malfoy is going to cash in on his favor sooner or later

-Harry goes to desperate measures to insure that his trip to Hogsmeade with Hermione lasts past the bookstore

-James Potter is certainly in some sort of business

-The fluffy bunny is named after the author of the Paradigm of Uncertainty series Lori. One of my favorite stories.

Summary: Harry and Hermione go on a date. Harry continues his rampant eavesdropping. Lucius Malfoy ponders the pondering of his Dark Lord.

"How do I look?"

"Like a watermelon."

Harry glared at Ginny Weasley as he attempted to fix his tie. The tie, however, had different plans on its mind – it refused to be crossed just right and it ended up looking like a huge lump on Harry's throat. The mirror was not helping his case as it muttered suggestions to "fluff up his hair" or "grin disarmingly."

"Also, you look deceptively Slytherin!" Ginny quipped as she scrimmaged for an object in Ron's trunk.

"You told me that the green would bring out my eyes!"

"Which it does! Doesn't change the fact that you still look like a Malfoy spawn," Ginny's muffled voice said from underneath Ron's bed.

"Please don't mention that twit right now. I'm nervous enough as it is."

"There's nothing to be nervous about Harry. I'm sure your date will go quite swimmingly. Who knows? Maybe she'll even let you catalog her books!" Ginny continued to tease him.

"Ginny, can you please be serious for five seconds? I know it's hard for you, with your brain capacity as it is, but can you at least try?"

"Harry, you won't need to do anything. Just wing it, Hermione couldn't care less."

"I don't want to wing it. What if she thinks I'm dressed up too much?"

"You're not."

"What if something gets stuck in my hair?"

"It looks bad anyways."

"What if she wants to do more than buy books?"

"Then buy her something else."

"What if she wants to go to...Madame Puddifoot's?"

"Maybe when the world ends."

"What if I accidentally grab her boob?"

"Consider it good luck."

"What if take a sip of something and it ends up dribbling down the side of my mouth?"

"Just make sure it doesn't look like you know what."

"GINNY WEASLEY!"

"HARRY POTTER! CALM THE FUCK DOWN!"

Ginny finally stood up from under the bed and glared at a panicked Harry Potter.

"Hermione will like you just the way you are. She doesn't care about how you look or whether you embarrass yourself. Just act like you normally do and she'll like you just as much as she likes you now," Ginny reasoned.

"But I want her to like me more than that!" Harry whined as he continued to fix his tie.

"And that will come with time! For now, just be grateful you've found an opportunity to rip her away from my brother and Neville."

"What are you doing, anyway?" Harry asked Ginny as he attempted to pat his hair down.

"Nothing! Good luck! I have to go!" Ginny dashed by Harry before he could say another word. He did note, however, that she was holding something in her hands and had shielded it from Harry's view as she passed him.

Sighing, Harry dropped his hands to his sides and stared at his reflection in the mirror. His hair still stuck in odd directions and his tie did look a little too vibrant for his liking. Scrunching his nose, Harry attempted to smooth out the wrinkles on his robes while simultaneously reaching for a bottle of cologne on his drawer. He popped the cap and gave it a hesitant sniff, his eyes watering from the decidedly odorous smell. Spraying just a bit on his wrist, Harry leaned down to see if the smell was any better on his skin.

"I think I'll just leave that alone."

"So I thought it was fascinating when the Professor mentioned the reason why wizards and witches tended to use wands to funnel their magical energy! I mean, I always had theories of my own, but none of the other DADA teachers have ever bothered touching on the subject. Professor Sheppard might have some weird teaching methods but I think I understand his method of teaching now. More of a trial by fire I think. A little Lupin but with a bit more urgency if you will," Hermione rattled on as she and Harry took the winding steps to Hogsmeade.

"I agree, the hands-on method has really helped me, at least," came Harry's rather truncated response in comparison to Hermione's tirade.

"Oh, no doubt Harry! You've shown marked improvement ever since your Third Year," Hermione paused for a perfunctory nod of humility, "You've done brilliantly."

"Thank you for bringing that up. Again," Harry's smile took the bite out of his words.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Hermione chuckled as she gave him a soft swat on the arm.

"By all means, refer to my crowning moment of humiliation as many times as you want."

"I'm really, really sorry!"

"I suppose I can forgive you for now."



Hermione gave another chuckle and turned around to fix the strap of her bag. Harry, meanwhile, turned the other way and exhaled deeply. Things were going better than anticipated so far. He had yet to trip over his own feet or slip up on his words. Not bad for the walk down to Hogsmeade.

As the pair weaved their way through the crowd, occasionally bumping into a stiff Auror or two, their shoulders would occasionally brush, causing Harry to grit his teeth as he fought to keep from reaching out and grasping her hand in his. Hermione, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed as she headed straight for the book shop.

The pair discussed more inane topics as they traversed their way from aisle to aisle in the book shop. Once or twice, Hermione had to reach up on the shelf to inspect a particularly interesting book. Each time, her shirt would ride up just a sliver and expose a tiny bit of skin on her back. Harry had to stuff his fist in his mouth in order to stop the appreciative moan from escaping his mouth.

"Harry can you help me reach that one?"

Harry gladly reached up to retrieve the book, *The Dark Tower*, and thankfully blessed the fates above for the day so far. As he turned to give her the book, their fingers brushed lightly and Harry bit back a smile. Hermione thanked him with a pleasant laugh and moved onto the next aisle. Harry kept the mood pleasant as they glossed over some advanced potions text.

"You know, I'm glad that you take your studies seriously. Ron and Neville are so lackadaisical when it comes to that," Hermione commented.

"Well my Mom always pounded it into my head. BET on CPD," Harry grinned as she caught on.

"A brew, an elixir, a tincture, a concoction, a philter, and a draft!" they said in unison as they recounted the different types of potions. Laughing at their own incredulity, they proceeded to make their way to the front counter as Hermione stacked her purchases in alphabetical order.

As they were approaching the cashier, however, Harry realized the implications of Hermione's purchase. The self-confessed date would soon come to a rather short end. Harry watched as Hermione, seemingly in slow motion, handed the cashier a couple of Galleons. Desperate to prolong their date, Harry quickly came to Hermione's side.

"Hermione! I was wondering if you'd like to go to Three Broomsticks and grab a drink or anything else for that matter..."

Harry rushed out his words before his overwhelming conscience could cause him to chicken out. The cashier raised an eyebrow and gave him a smirk. Red in the face but resolute, Harry kept his eyes trained on a now flustered Hermione.

"Um, I'm sorry Harry but I'm supposed to meet Neville and Ron in a little bit," Hermione stammered.

"That's okay with me! We can meet them at Three Broomsticks."

Hermione looked absolutely crestfallen as she replied, "I'm sorry Harry but we're going to meet a couple of people in private."

Harry's face fell as he watched Hermione fidget while the cashier tried to hand Hermione a couple of Knuts in change.

"Well, okay," Harry muttered. Hermione looked to be in extreme pain as she tried to place the books in her bag, all the while apologizing profusely.

"It's just that we had it planned a while ago and don't take it to mean as I don't enjoy your company because I do and I appreciated you helping me pick out books but I promised them I would go with them and..." Hermione trailed off as Harry held a hand up for her to stop.

"It's okay Hermione," Harry said, mostly to exit the awkward situation they were in, "I'll see you back at school."

Hermione looked as if she wanted to say something but held back. Apologizing again, Hermione quickly exited the book store and left a crestfallen Harry with the cashier.

"If it helps any, I didn't think she was particularly a looker," the cashier offered.

Harry waved his wand at the front book shelf. The books came cascading down in a jumbled pile, flying into all corners of the book shop.

"Oops. Don't quite have a handle on that spell yet. Guess you'll have to clean that up."

Harry recollected that the Trio would be meeting up with a pair called 'Padfoot and Moony.' Though he knew to some extent that he should not have eavesdropped on their conversation the other night, much less follow up on what he heard, Harry could not help himself and pulled up the hood of his jacket in a rather weak attempt to disguise himself. Thankfully, a steady drizzle had started to fall upon the sleepy town which let Harry blend right in to the environment. Harry also waved his wand in front of his face and cast a spell that would lessen the reflection of light off of his glasses.

No point in sneaking around somewhere if you're just going to get caught like that.

His father's warning rang clear in his head. During the summer, James Potter had given his son a crash course in evasion as well as combat. There were occasions in which escaping the enemy served to be a much better solution than fighting him. At least, that's what his Dad always said. Harry did not quite believe in running away to fight.

Keeping his eyes glued to the front door of Three Broomsticks, Harry bided his time until the Trio reappeared, quite some time after Hermione entered the establishment. Although there was a twinge of anger when he saw Hermione enter the place he suggested (the suggestion she declined), he quickly brushed it off as he stood up from his bench and followed the Trio a couple of paces behind. Weaving through the crowd, he could see Hermione arguing with Ron as they headed away from the main hub of the village.

The crowd was thinning out, but Harry kept his cool and slid into a parallel alley, making sure to keep enough of a distance behind the arguing Trio to remain undetected, but close enough so he would not lose them. He strained his ears to key in on their argument, but it

was to no avail – they were simply too far away. Thinking quickly, Harry cast a Supersensory charm on his ears. A barrage of noises assaulted his ears until he finally keyed on the sound of Hermione's familiar voice.

"What's your problem, Hermione?"

"Nothing Ron! I just ... and ... so would you ... alright?"

"You've just been ... have to ... Harry."

"Cut it out, I'm sure ... so don't say anymore to her Ron."

"Alright, sheesh!"

Harry only caught snippets of the conversation as he had yet to master the charm that his father had taught him. Grunting in frustration, Harry sped up his pace to catch up to the Trio as they began to enter the forest leading to the Shrieking Shack. He carefully slid from tree to tree, trying desperately to keep himself out of their view. Offhandedly, he wondered why the Trio were entering a site as inhospitable and inaccessible as the Shrieking Shack.

The three of them wove in between trees, their footsteps steady and sure, as if they had tread this path before. Harry noticed that they were eventually heading back into the direction of the castle. Carefully avoiding a series of branches and twigs, Harry tugged his hood tighter around his head and continued to follow the Trio. Harry noted with increasing apprehension that they were quickly approaching the infamous Whomping Willow.

Watching as Neville fished a long stick from underneath a rock; Harry gasped aloud as Neville reached out and tapped a knot on the Whomping Willow causing the tree to freeze in place. Neville's head snapped up and his eyes narrowed as he surveyed the trees at the edge of the forest. Harry held his breath, squeezing his body as thinly as possible behind the large trunk of a cooperating tree.

"Neville, what is it?" asked Hermione.

"I thought I heard someone."

There was a pause that lasted for what seemed like an eternity as Harry literally shut his eyes and willed Neville to turn away. Finally, there was a slight shuffle as he heard voices again.

"Neville, it's just the trees. Can we get a move on? This place creeps me out even more than Snape!" Ron said.

"Alright."

Harry did not dare turn around after Neville's acquiesce, for he feared that the Trio was simply waiting for him to come out from behind the tree. After a few painstaking minutes and no indication that the Trio remained at the base of the Willow, Harry took a tiny peek out from behind his tree and saw no one around. Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry carefully made his way to the base of the Willow, examining the now active Whomping Willow. He repeated Neville's actions and found, to his relief, that the Willow calmed itself once more. Only when he was at the base of the Willow did Harry see a slight entrance at the trunk of the tree. Taking a deep breath, Harry crouched and made his way into the Whomping Willow.

Bending low to avoid the dilapidated, wooden beams, Harry marveled that he was actually able to follow the Trio into the Willow. Stepping over a series of cobwebs and branches, Harry carefully made his way onto more wooden ground, noting that this tunnel was leading him into some sort of establishment. After a couple minutes of crouched walking, Harry could hear faint voices and a light at the end of the tunnel.

Carefully taking light steps, Harry maneuvered himself behind a rather dinged wall and looked through a small crack into the other room to see Neville pacing in front of Ron, Hermione and to his great surprise Professor Lupin and another character he could not quite identify.

"I mean what do you think these dreams mean? There has to be a reason they're getting into my head," Neville paced in frustration, wearing a hole into the already worn carpet.

"Neville, it's important that you learn to close your mind! It's not safe for you to have that connection with You-Know-Who," Professor Lupin implored.

"I know, I know, I just know that there's something important about this one," Neville continued to pace.

Professor Lupin and the other raggedy character exchanged a glance that did not go unnoticed by the rest of the people in the shack. Harry moved carefully so he could improve his view through the little sliver in the wall and focused his attention on that seemingly familiar raggedy character.

"What is it, Sirius?" Hermione asked.

"There is...something," Sirius said slowly.

"Sirius..." Professor Lupin said in a cautionary tone.

Harry bit back a gasp upon the realization that the raggedy character was Sirius Black. Harry knew that he had recognized him from somewhere, but it was not until Hermione said his name that Harry made the connection of the man sitting not ten feet away from him, and the man in the 'Wanted' posters not two years ago. It was the same Sirius Black who was placed in the prison Azkaban for the torture and murder of Peter Pettigrew. Harry knew that Peter had been his parent's Secret Keeper during You-Know-Who's last reign.

The story his parents had told him when Sirius Black first escaped Azkaban was that Sirius turned out to be a double agent and brought Pettigrew to You-Know-Who to reveal the Potter's location. Pettigrew had somehow escaped them but was found by Black rather quickly in a crowded Muggle area. Black had killed him in public, incinerating his body to nothing more than a finger. Refusing to even talk to him, Harry's parents did not answer as Sirius Black plead for them to hear his explanation as he was sent to Azkaban and imprisoned in contained cell for life until his mysterious escape. Gripping his wand tightly, Harry grew angry as he watched the people he deemed to be his "friends" interact with an escaped convict.

"Voldemort – sorry Ron – is looking for something," Sirius began, "He's looking for a weapon he did not have last time."

Harry swore that Sirius glanced directly at him as he explained himself to the Trio. Momentarily removing himself from the

improvised peep hole, Harry took a deep breath and steadied himself.

"And it's located in the Ministry isn't it?" Neville leaned forward in excitement.

"Yes."

"Then why don't we get it?" Neville asked.

"It doesn't work that way Neville," Sirius patiently explained, "Just know that we have people watching and guarding it all the time."

"Like my Dad?" Ron interjected.

"Yes, Ron, your father has been taking turns watching over it," Lupin replied.

"So why should I close the connection with You-Know-Who? I could tell you if he was up to something!"

"Because it works both ways Neville! He can see into your mind as well and it is imperative you close that connection," Sirius implored yet again. Neville did not have a rebuttal at that statement.

"So it's safe then? We don't need to worry about it," Hermione asked Sirius as her eyes flitted between him and Neville.

"Do not dare worry about it. We have it completely under control," Lupin looked pointedly at Neville.

Neville stood in silence, all eyes trained on him, as he seemingly gathered his thoughts. Stroking his chin in deep thought, Neville finally glanced up and gave Sirius an exasperated sigh.

"Okay, fine, I'll leave it alone and try to close the connection," Neville said, without much conviction.

"Good. Also, keep an eye on your classmates," Sirius said as he rose from the box he sat on.

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Because you need to know who you can trust."

"I think we've got that under control," Neville nodded.

"Really? Because one of them is in here right now," Sirius quickly pointed his wand right at Harry's hiding place.

Harry felt his body freeze and his arms snap to his side. Without the ability to move his limbs, gravity took over and Harry landed on the wooden floor below with a perfunctory plunk. Sirius quickly strode over to him and pointed his wand at his remote form.

"Harry Potter."

Lucius Malfoy strode through his Manor with elegant, unhurried strides. It was important to always keep one's self dignified, lest one becomes such unworthy creatures – like Muggles. Strictly abiding by this philosophy, Lucius Malfoy kept his pace calm, even though he was late to a meeting with the Dark Lord. He knew he was likely to receive a punishment of some kind, but Lucius Malfoy refused to give up his pride and honor.

He turned towards the secret passage that led to the room the Dark Lord frequented when he was keen to discuss things with his top aides. He entered the chamber and bowed low to the Dark Lord, making sure his elegant nose touched the stone, cold floor.

"You're late, Lucius."

"My apologies, my Lord."

"Your reason?"

"My wife, my Lord."

"Be grateful I am in a jovial mood, Lucius, or else I would be forced to rid you of that nuisance you call your wife."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"How is the situation at the Ministry?"



"Progressing well, we have managed to place one of the Unspeakables under an Imperius curse, and it's only a matter of time before we gain entrance."

"Good. Rise, Lucius."

Lucius Malfoy picked his nose up off the floor but kept his head bowed as he straightened his back into a stiff position. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the fat, balding form of Peter Pettigrew.

"Peter, bring me the map," hissed the Dark Lord.

Malfoy watched the pathetic excuse of a wizard gather several pieces of rolled parchment from an adjacent desk and hand it to the Dark Lord. Malfoy internally questioned the merit of keeping the squib-like Pettigrew around but he dared not air his concerns around the Dark Lord.

"I have good news, Lucius."

"Excellent, my Lord."

"I believe I have found its location."

"Really?"

Lucius Malfoy made the mistake of snapping his head up and meeting the Dark Lord's eyes. Instantly, he was assaulted by an attack on his mind, so powerful it brought Malfoy to his knees. Taking great care not to make any sound to reveal his pain, Malfoy grit his teeth and rode out the mental assault.

"Yes, Lucius, I have found it."

"That is amazing news, my Lord," Malfoy staggered to his feet, careful not to make his mistake again.

"Indeed. I have circled its location on the map. Form a team and investigate the area. Report back to me soon."

"Yes, my Lord," Malfoy took the maps that Voldemort levitated towards him and turned around to exit the room – but not before he caught the smirking face of Peter Pettigrew.

"Lucius?"

"My Lord?"

"Do take care of your wife."

"Yes, my Lord."

Lucius Malfoy exited the room and immediately opened the roll of parchment in his hand. His eyes widened at the location circled on the detailed map. If the Dark Lord was correct about the location encircled on the map, Malfoy knew that the time of reckoning would be coming soon. A shiver of fear and excitement tore through his body as he rolled up the parchment, and quickly sought through his mind for reliable agents out in the field to investigate this matter.

QuickQuill Notes:

-Thoughts on the rather short date?

-What has You-Know-Who found?

-Will Harry ever get Hermione?

-Stay tuned

-And Reviews!

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Really, I have five dollars in my checking account.

A/N: I promise I'm not dead nor do I not care. I also have other chapters written this time around. I am but a broke college student.

Harry's eyes nervously flittered between Hermione and Neville as he watched the pair pour over their Transfiguration notes. Occasionally, one or the other would glance up at him and give a venomous glare of some sort. Hermione's glare usually consisted of a tight squinting of the eyes and the visible gritting of her teeth. Neville's glare on the other hand contained a tinge of sympathy. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione cut him off with an impressively vicious glare and an accompanying nose scrunch.

"What Harry?" Neville asked, acknowledging the look of disbelief on Hermione's face.

"I was just wondering if you knew the essential wand movement needed to turn inanimate objects into quasi-elements," Harry said in what could only be a scared whisper.

"It's a half-circle followed by a hard swish and a point. Maybe if you took better notes, paid attention, and didn't eavesdrop on random conversations, you would have known!" Hermione slammed her textbook shut, gathered her belongings, and stomped her way up the girl's staircase.

"Got it," whispered Harry as he looked after her.

"She'll get over it eventually. At the very least she'll stop trying to kill just by staring at you," Neville gave Harry a half smile as he tried to make light of the situation.

"It's useless, I let you all down anyways," Harry grumbled.

"If you let us down, you would have turned in Padfoot by now. Seeing as how you haven't, you've got most of my trust back at least," Neville said with no sense of sarcasm or lightheartedness.

"Thanks for that. I couldn't have turned him in, at least not after what you have told me anyways."

When Harry found out that it was indeed Sirius Black holding him captive, he began to thank his mother and father for ushering him into this world as he was convinced that Black was going to eviscerate him. Fortunately for Harry, that was not the case. In between Hermione yelling at him, Ron berating him, and Neville repeatedly shaking his head, Black managed to convince Harry that it was the other fellow, Peter Pettigrew, who betrayed his parents and subsequently the Longbottoms. After a lengthy discussion as for the reasons of Black's discreteness, they untied Harry and let him free.

"How mad is Ron still?" Harry asked, grimacing at the probable response.

"Well, you know, famous Weasley temper and all," Neville tried to dismiss it with a hand wave, but his expression belied a different answer.

"I'll make sure to stay away from him for now."

Fate would not be too kind to Harry Potter. As if on cue, the second to last Weasley ambled through the portrait and fixed Harry with a patently petulant glare. Making his way over to the set of couches near the fireplace, Ron purposely stared down Harry as he weaved through the maze of random students.

"Neville, want to watch me get some Keeper practice in?"

"Not particularly, you usually bewitch the Quaffles to go slower so you can block more of them."

"Well I'll make sure to put them on hyper speed this time."

"Why don't you just let Harry have a go at them?"

"Harry's a Seeker, wouldn't know a thing or two about trying to score."

"I can do it!" Harry exclaimed, eager to be in Ron's good graces.

"Thanks, but I don't particularly trust your skills," Ron said with a look of disdain.

"Ron..." Neville started to protest, but Ron cut him off with a simple look. Shrugging to Harry, Neville set off with Ron, presumably to the Quidditch pitch. Sighing, Harry tossed his quill up in the air and blew a few strands of his hair out of his eyes.

Just brilliant.

Later that day, Harry stood in a position not so unlike the one he had taken up not a few nights previous. To put it more frankly, Harry was stalking Hermione as she moved to and fro within the library. Knowing that Ron would never be the first one to forgive him, Harry set out to somehow apologize to Hermione for his colossal mistake.

While he spied on Hermione, Harry realized that he had no particular plan on how to apologize to Hermione. While he knew that following a girl after a date was no way to charm her, Harry couldn't help his curiosity. Even as he child, he had an instinctive need to know. So with that little guilty admission, Harry rounded the corner and approached Hermione tentatively. To her credit, she did not immediately bolt as soon as she spotted Harry out of the corner of her eye. Instead, she stonily ignored his presence until he was almost standing on her foot.

"Hermione, can I talk to you?" Harry squirmed. She refused to acknowledge him and continued to simultaneously place and replace books on the shelves.

"Look, you don't even have to listen. I know it's very creepy of me to follow you guys all the way to the Whomping Willow. Although you do have to admit that if you saw someone disappear into a tree trunk, you'd have to be quite suspicious as well."

Hermione turned to him and raised an eyebrow at this suggestion. Wincing Harry backpedaled to apologize again.

"What I meant was that I'm naturally a curious person and while I know it's just incredibly odd of me to follow you and Ron to a private meeting that I wasn't invited to, I hope you can at least understand why I followed you into the Whomping Willow. I know that's a terrible apology but I'm very sorry," Harry pleaded in what seemed to be one breathe.

"What are you sorry for?" Hermione snapped. Harry blinked, completely off guard by the question.

"Um, for...for... following you?" Harry said in a relatively unsure tone.

Snapping the last book in her hand shut, Hermione launched into a tirade that had Harry wincing every few seconds, "Harry! You followed Ron and I from Hogsmeade all the way to the Whomping Willow. You then decided to sneak in after us and spy on us while we were talking about very important things!"

"That's not fair! You were talking to what I thought at the time was a convicted murderer. What am I supposed to do? Announce myself out loud before getting myself killed?" Harry rebutted in a bout of indignation.

"Except you know now that Padfoot is completely innocent," Hermione started to burn red in the face as their conversation became auspiciously loud.

"But I didn't know that at the time," Harry stressed.

"I don't care! Besides, this isn't exactly the first time you've done this to us, to me, Harry!" Hermione said pointedly. At this point, Harry visibly flinched and lowered his eyes to the ground, fully dressed down from Hermione's verbal barb. After a moment, he felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder, signaling she wanted to speak to him.

"Thank you for not telling anyone about Padfoot, Harry, but following me from Hogsmeade was just creepy. If I didn't know you better, I'd say you were a stalker. I also know that you had been standing there with Draco for a while during that night. I didn't mention it to Neville and Ron because one of the two would have gone ballistic. Thanks for keeping the secret Harry, but please just leave me alone for a while?" Hermione asked him solemnly.

Nodding, Harry shuffled a couple of more times, his eyes completely glued to his shoes. The startling revelation that Hermione knew he was spying on them that night with Draco grounded him more than he thought it would. Forget trying to gain her admiration, Harry was struggling to cope with how he was going to repair their rather tenuous friendship at the moment.

"I'll see you around," Hermione said after a rather awkward pause. Readjusting the strap of her bag, Hermione quickly scurried away from the desolate teen.

The dull roar of the crowd could be heard within the entrance tunnel to the Quidditch Pitch. As the Gryffindor team shuffled their feet in an attempt to gain position to their flying entrance, Harry found himself occasionally bumping into Ron as he brought up the rear of the group. Ron had quickly won the Keeper position after Oliver vacated the position.

At the moment though, Harry wished that someone else would have been Keeper since he did not quite trust Ron not to whack him with his Cleansweep. To Ron's credit, he kept to his space and did not go out of his way to insult Harry, at least not this time. Much to Harry's surprise though, Ron did turn around to address him just before the starting sides were announced via Lee Jordan.

"Harry, I know that you seem to be a right git, but please catch the damn Snitch. I know you can't possibly mess up everything in sight," Ron said in a clipped tone.

Harry knew that Ron had insulted him but took the communication as a good sign. Gripping his Firebolt tightly, Harry mounted it as he heard the names of the Chasers being announced through Lee's amplified voice.

"...the Keeper, Ron WEASLEY!" Ron flew out to a thunderous roar as the mostly pro-Gryffindor crowd roared their approval.

"Last but definitely not least comes the star Gryffindor Seeker, Harry POTTER!" Lee drew out Harry's last name as he zoomed and zipped out of the tunnel to the wild cheering of his classmates. Executing a few barrel rolls on his way to the contingent of Gryffindor supporters, Harry could not help the smile that broke out on his face. No matter his problems, everything was wiped away when it came to Quidditch. He spotted Neville and Ginny giving him a thumbs up as Harry zoomed by on his broom.

"And here come the pride of the Slytherin House, introducing their Captain, Graham MONTAGUE!"

One by one, the Slytherin players rocketed out onto the pitch to a spatter of boos and a raucous cheering from the crowd of Slytherin housemates. Harry could spot the pompous ponce known as Draco Malfoy as last out of the tunnel. Malfoy made a lap around the pitch and as he flew by the Gryffindor team, his trademark smirk graced his face as he mockingly winked at Harry.

"If I didn't know any better Harry, I'd think Malfoy's taken a fancy towards you," George quipped.

"He wishes," Harry grumbled much to the amusement of the rest of the team. After a quick meeting with Madam Hooch, the captains set off to their respective teams.

"I don't have to tell you all that this match might get ugly. Harry, catch the Snitch as quickly as you can please? We already have the lead in points and I kind of want to make it out of this game without anyone in the Hospital Wing," Angelina commanded. Harry nodded, his face rather grim.

Madam Hooch tossed the Quaffle in the air and Harry watched as Alicia immediately latched onto the ball and sped her way to the opposing goals. Rising high above the crowd, Harry took some time to survey the situation. Malfoy was not too far behind, keeping a wary eye on his Gryffindor counter part.

"It's Spinnet. Back to Bell. Back to Spinnet, great move by the nimble Chaser! Pucey is closing on her. She finds Johnson who's got a clear look! GOAL to Gryffindor! 10-0!"

Harry listened to Lee's commentating in the back of his head, his eyes flittering about the pitch as he tried to locate the tiny, golden speck. Deciding to have a little fun with Malfoy, Harry immediately descended into a dive, making sure to disrupt the Slytherin Chasers along the way.

"Potter's diving! Might he have found the Snitch already? Malfoy's not too far behind but Potter has the lead. Potter swirls right through the Slytherin Chasers! Dangerous move by the Gryffindor Seeker...oh...but he's pulled out of the dive."

Harry pulled up and glanced over his shoulder to see Malfoy's broom wobbling as he barely kept himself from smashing into the



ground. Smiling grimly, Harry once again took to the air to perch himself above the game.

"Pucey muscles his way through the crowd and he's alone versus the Keeper. Shows left but goes right, completely fooling Weasley! 10-10!"

The game continued to progress in Slytherin's favor as they gained the foothold on the match, the score currently at 60 to 10. Harry decided to have another marauding dive to disrupt the overpowering Slytherin Chasers.

"Potter's having another dive into the crowd but Malfoy's not having any of it this time. Wait a moment, Malfoy has pulled off in the other direction!"

Panicking, Harry immediately about faced and pelted after Malfoy as quickly as he the broom could fly. If Malfoy had indeed spotted the Snitch, Harry felt like he was acres behind him. As Malfoy tore into a series of barrel rolls through the Chasers, he suddenly pulled up in front of the Slytherin crowd and flipped off Harry while Madam Hooch was distracted. The Slytherin crowd roared their approval as Harry rolled his eyes while he flew away.

"Looks like Malfoy's having a bit of a laugh, that git. Meanwhile, Pucey continues his hot streak as he scores another goal. 70-10, Slytherin."

Ron was clearly distressed as he continued to be outwitted by the Slytherin Chasers. Fred and George did their best to disrupt their flow but Slytherin were almost brushing off the Bludgers with their form. Harry knew that he needed to find the Snitch quickly before the game devolved any further.

"Spinnet's gone on a rather adventurous flight path here. She feints left, avoids a close Bludger, dodges another Slytherin. Great one-two with Johnson and she should score here and she does! 20-70 Slytherin. Oh but Spinnet looks to have pulled up with an injury here! I wonder if that Bludger wasn't as far as away as we thought."

Alicia grimaced as she waved to Madam Hooch with her functioning arm. Alicia pointed to her arm from where Harry could see her.

Madam Hooch gave it a quick inspection before immediately sending her off the pitch to the Hospital Wing.

"Looks like Gryffindor are going to have to play a man or woman down for the time being. Let's see what steel Gryffindor are made of here."

Unfortunately for the Gryffindor House, they seemed to be made of somewhat malleable material as Slytherin poured it on with their man advantage. The quick but petite Chasers of Gryffindor were overmatched by the hunkering Slytherins. Fred and George did their best to beat away the challenges but could only hold off the onslaught. It was already 120 to 30 in Slytherin's favor by the time Alicia came back onto the pitch. Harry knew time was quickly running out.

As he drifted between the Slytherin goal posts, Harry could make out a somewhat golden speck on the completely other side of the pitch. Malfoy was currently stationed somewhere near the midfield and clearly had the advantage if Harry took off immediately. Capturing this Snitch would require a bit of guile and deceit on Harry's part.

Pulling the Firebolt upwards, Harry climbed until he was quite a ways above Malfoy, who had momentarily took his eyes off of the Gryffindor Seeker. Making sure that he could still see the Snitch hovering near the bottom of the Gryffindor goal posts, Harry took a deep breath before tilting his broom down in what would later be described as "The Potter Death Dive."

"Crunching hit by one of the Weasley twins, I don't know which one as Pucey loses the Quaffle...oh...Potter's gone into a bit of a dive here, what's the boy wonder up to now? Malfoy hasn't spotted him and, wait, Potter's headed directly to Malfoy! This doesn't seem to be a gimmick! Potter's going to shave this one close!"

Harry veered at the last moment and felt the bubble of air rush around Malfoy. The blond haired boy spun around in place before giving chase to his nemesis. Harry ducked as a stray Bludger attempted to take his head off his shoulders. Giving a quick glance over his shoulders, Harry could see that Malfoy recovered from Harry's close brush and was quickly gaining on him. Harry urged his Firebolt forwards as he focused solely on the Snitch. The pair were

barely a meter off the ground as the wind whistled in Harry's ears, his eyes glued to the Snitch which circled around the center Gryffindor goal post.

Harry knew that this capture was going to be a tight affair. The Snitch was circling the center goal post while he and Malfoy were approaching it from a side angle. Capturing it would require weaving through the goal posts while avoiding collision with each other. Harry gave a quick glance over his shoulder to see Malfoy had taken up a drafting position. Guessing that Malfoy was aiming to overtake him as soon as they reached the goal posts, Harry decided ahead of time to weave right and duck under Malfoy's attempt. He raised his height to about two meters off the ground and saw Malfoy follow suit. The slight elevation gave him about one and a half meters of wiggle room as they flew at the broom's highest speeds.

"They're closing in on the Snitch! Malfoy's slightly trailing behind Potter. Potter weaves and ducks! Oh, but the Snitch has darted upwards! Potter and Malfoy are snaking up the goal posts. They've reached the top! POTTER'S JUMPING! He's got it, but he's in free fall! AND WEASLEY GRABS HIM! GRYFFINDOR WIN! GRYFFINDOR WIN! 180 - 120! Potter leaps off his broom to grab the Snitch and Weasley catches him mid flight, GRYFFINDOR WIN!" Lee Jordan exclaimed as he jumped and down, his dreadlocks flying wildly about as he celebrated.

Harry held on to the Snitch in a bit of a daze as he awkwardly maneuvered his body so he was not laying on Ron. As soon as they hit the ground, Harry hopped off with shaky legs, his hands on his knees as he heaved air into his lungs. He winced as Ron clapped him in the back repeatedly but enjoyed the rain of compliments being thrown upon him.

"Harry, that was amazing mate! Bloody gave me a scare when you were falling, almost didn't catch you. I saw you diving from across the pitch, but I figured it was another of your runs until I saw you start pelting after me. I didn't even think of moving when you two were coming up the goal posts, I could have sworn Malfoy tried to take you out then..." Ron continued to ramble the play by play, smiling from ear to ear as he repeatedly gave Harry congratulatory slaps on the back. Ron, at least for now, had seemed to have forgiven Harry's past transgressions.

They were soon mobbed by the rest of the Gryffindor supporters. Exhilarated, Harry welcomed the support and admiration of his housemates for something that had finally gone his way that week.

Singing Aye, Aye Harry, Harry Potter!

Singing Aye, Aye Harry, Harry Potter!

Singing Aye, Aye Harry, Aye, Aye Harry, Aye, Aye Harry, Harry Potter!

Singing Aye, Aye Harry, Harry Potter!

Is it Draco Malfoy? No he's shite!

Although he looks like a lemon! Someone better tell 'em!

Harry Potter's fucking dynamite!

The Gryffindor common room sang the song to the tune of 'Coming 'Round the Mountain' at the top of their lungs as the post-match celebration continued well into the night. Ron dared anyone to name a better play than the miracle Harry just pulled off and Harry was just glad that Ron did not hate him anymore.

"Not bad," Ginny said as she sidled up next to Harry, clinking her glass against his.

"Really? Even I can say that was bloody marvelous."

"Well you seem to have attracted a couple admirers," Ginny nudged her head towards a group of assorted females. Harry caught their stares and gave them a wave to which they heartily responded.

"It was a pretty good catch," Harry, most usually modest, allowed himself that moment of indulgence. Scanning the crowd, Harry spotted Hermione laughing with Neville and Ron near a corner of the room. Ginny followed his gaze and wrinkled her nose.

"What happened to you two? I didn't realize you were that bad at taking a girl out on date."

"I'm not!" Harry protested, "I should just...probably leave her alone for a little bit."

Ginny raised her eyebrows, but Harry offered nothing more for he could not reveal anymore. Ginny sighed and took Harry by the crook of his elbow.

"Let's go Harry, I want to introduce you to some of my friends!"

"But Ginny!"

"Yes means yes, Harry!"

Lily Potter waved her wand about her as she set to cleaning the dishes. The majority of the Order had left and she was simply tidying up her residence before she went to sleep. Unfortunately, one person had remained behind.

A dark haired man with glasses leaned against the frame of the door as he watched Lily rearrange the chairs around the table. He picked up his wand to help, but Lily waved him off with her free hand.

"I don't need any help, you know the way out." Lily said succinctly, offering no room for conversation.

"Lily please," James took a step into the kitchen.

"What do you want?" Lily snapped at him. James stuck his hands in his pockets and blew a stray bang of hair from his eyes.

"You hear Harry won the game for Gryffindor today?" James inquired.

"Of course."

"He's a great Seeker."

"You would know that wouldn't you?" Lily said with a bite in her voice.

"I would hope so," James weakly joked.

"Listen, James," Lily drew his name out sarcastically, "What do you need? I thought we discussed everything that was needed at the meeting with the Order."

"There's something else..." James trailed off. Lily turned to him, her hands on her hips.

"Well?" she said impatiently.

"Voldemort's found something. He's found the tower," James said, no longer joking. Lily softly gasped and clutched her hand to her chest.

"How could he possibly -"

"He doesn't know he's found it. Not yet at least. He suspects that he's found something of importance, but I don't think he knows what the tower is," James explained.

"What does he want with it?" Lily said, clearly distressed.

"I have a couple of guesses, most involving Harry," James said frankly.

Lily nodded, already knowing that was to be expected. She raised her almost teary eyes to his and exhaled loudly. He looked so much like James it pained her.

"Take it off," she snapped at him. James opened his mouth to argue but thought better of it. Waving his wand in front of his face, he cleared the Glamour charm and Lily watched as his hazel eyes morphed back into his original green eyes.

"Thank you," Lily softly whispered, "It's just hard to look at you when you're exactly like him."

"I know."

Lifting her eyes to meet his once again Lily paused a moment before saying, "How long are you going to keep this up Harry? How long are we going to keep this façade going?"

"Not until Harry's ready. He's still discovering himself, I'll know when he's ready for this. Trust me on that," Potter assured.

"I almost can't stand to see what will happen when Harry finds out that his supposed father is actually a time traveling future of himself," Lily cynically replied.

"Well I can tell you he'll probably try to hex me."

"Brilliant."

There was a pregnant pause as they mulled over their respective thoughts. Sensing that Lily had shut down for the night, the elder Potter gathered his coat and signaled he was leaving. Lily nodded in response but remained seated in her chair. Making sure to quietly close the kitchen door leading to her yard, an elder Harry James Potter took a quick look at his surroundings before leaving the Lily Potter residence with a soft pop.

Girls.

Harry would never cease to be amazed by them. Whether it was the loaded questions, the constant questioning of one's actions, or simply the questionable decisions they made, Harry could usually not make a single iota of their ruminations. One thing he was certain of though was the fact that Hermione Granger had officially placed him in an off limits area concerning their friendship. Apparently, following someone after a date which she never admitted to crossed certain lines of courtship. Never too cold to be considered rude, Hermione found a way to balance the steady line of being neither too cordial nor too inviting. In short, Harry found the whole situation to be miserable.

The situation was only compounded by the fact that Harry had somehow been paired with Malfoy yet again during patrols. To make matters worse, Malfoy was especially sour, the sting of defeat still biting his rather morose feelings. When Harry somehow found Ginny wandering the halls again, he had mixed feelings of relief and trepidation as he approached his friend.

"So how does it feel not having any friends outside of the poorest Weasley of them all?" Draco poked.

"Have you ever had a girlfriend Potter? I'm sure Weaslette would let you give her a ride, I'm sure she's had more than enough practice with her brothers."

"Does it hurt knowing that you're half Mudblood?"

Sparks flew from Harry's wand at this little comment. Malfoy grinned triumphantly as he watched Harry's jaw clench and unclench. Walking backwards so that he was now facing Harry, Malfoy continued to push on.

"Oh? I've hit a sore spot have I? I empathize with your father, I would have left her a long time ago as well," Malfoy said with a twisted smile.

As Harry was about to respond, Ginny cut him off, "I wonder what your father thinks, Malfoy? Does it hurt him knowing that his son is an abject failure at everything in life."



"I think you're the one that knows about failure, little one. The runt of a family too poor to even afford you a decent pair of shoes," Malfoy snarled. Indeed, Ginny's shoes were too worn for a fourth year, the soles coming apart at the bottom.

"At least my family cares about me, you're just a flaming disappointment to your father," Ginny spat. Malfoy made a move towards her, but Harry roughly pulled him back.

"Enough."

"If I'm a disappointment, it's because my family have these things called expectations. The only thing you're expected to do is spread your legs for whatever money can get you," Malfoy continued.

"You slimy, good for nothing fuck head," Ginny brandished her wand and Harry now had to place himself in between the pair, fearful of an actual confrontation.

"I SAID ENOUGH!" Harry intervened. Roughly shoving both of them away from each other, Harry saw that Malfoy was indeed rather emotional at the moment. It was a characteristic quite unlike his usually composed self.

"What has gotten into you Malfoy?" Harry questioned. While Malfoy was never polite, he had been incredibly vicious all evening. Perhaps realizing that he was indeed being uncharacteristic of himself, Malfoy straightened his robes and adorned his usual air of condescension.

"Even I'm not immune to being brought down to trashy levels," Malfoy pointed a look towards Ginny.

"Ginny, stop! He's just trying to get a rise out of you," Harry had to force Ginny back yet again.

"Is everything all right here?" Padma Patil asked as she stumbled upon the unusual trio. At her side, Harry spotted the Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang, trailing along.

"Everything's fine, Padma. Where's Anthony?" Harry referred to the other Ravenclaw prefect.

"Anthony got sick and is in the hospital wing. All of the other prefects were booked for tonight and I didn't want to particularly walk alone so Flitwick gave special permission to Cho for the night," Padma shrugged.

"Okay. Cho," Harry nodded in greeting and Cho smiled back at him.

"Well if you're sure everything's alright then," Padma gave a wary glance towards Malfoy. Malfoy rolled his eyes in return.

"Weasley and I were just comparing similarities," Malfoy sarcastically responded. Padma raised her eyebrows at this comment and gave a questioning look to Harry. Harry simply shook his head and waved it off.

"Trust me, everything's okay," Harry placated her.

"Well if you're sure. Bye Harry, bye Ginny," Padma said, looking as if she did not believe Harry at all.

"Bye Harry," Cho said with another smile.

"Bye you two."

As Harry turned back to the formerly arguing pair, he noticed that Ginny was not angry at all anymore. Instead she was wearing a mischievous grin on her face as she looked back and forth between the disappearing back of Cho and the puzzled face of Harry.

"She likes you!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Is that even possible?" Malfoy asked, mostly to himself.

"She doesn't like me," Harry sided with Malfoy for once.

"Harry. Anthony's not sick. He was in the Ravenclaw common room as I was leaving. That's where I was coming from," Ginny reasoned, "Cho must have wanted to accidentally bump into you while Padma was on patrols."

"Wait, what?" Harry asked, now honestly befuddled.

"Well she could have also wanted to bump into Malfoy, but I highly doubt that," Ginny said with a victorious smile.

"Completely plausible. One time, a girl burned my name into the small of her back because I said hello to her," Malfoy announced.

"Wait, back to me, why does she like me?" Harry ignored Malfoy.

"Well you're cute enough," Ginny reasoned, giving Malfoy a death glare after the boy scoffed.

"No, that's just...no," Harry was completely befuddled at this point.

"I have to agree with Potter for once. Completely out of his league."

"No, that's not what I said."

"But that's what you meant."

"No. Malfoy, shut up! Ginny, why would she like me?" Harry asked again.

"Why can't someone like you? Just because you've spent enough time pining over..." Ginny trailed off as she remembered that they were not alone.

"...Mudblood. Don't worry, it's pretty obvious to everyone," Malfoy finished.

"SHUT UP MALFOY!" Harry and Ginny yelled in unison.

"Look," Malfoy continued unperturbed, "Cho Chang is not within the realm of your possibilities. Neither is Granger but for different reasons. Cho Chang is an older, experienced woman. Have you even kissed a girl Potter?"

Harry fumed in silence while Ginny looked ready to hex Malfoy into oblivion.

"That's what I thought. You have to be able to pull some strings within girls, Potter. I bet even I can get Weasley on her knees if I tried," Malfoy said with little to no shame.

"Oh yeah?" Ginny stepped up to Malfoy, her body almost flush against his.

"Oh yes," Malfoy leered, leaning closer to her face. Unfortunately for Malfoy, Ginny was not interested in that sort of interaction. She instead kned him right in the groin, causing the Slytherin to crumble into the ground, groaning in agony. Harry took in the fallen boy with a nod.

"Excellent technique."

"Thank you, Harry," Ginny smiled brightly, "Walk me back?"

"Sure, I think our patrols are done anyways. I'm sure you can find your way back, Malfoy," Harry leaned down and gave the boy a pat on the back. Malfoy could only groan out, "Sod off."

As Harry and Ginny walked back to the Gryffindor common room, Ginny chirped up, "So about Cho."

"Ginny..."

The next few weeks went without any incident as Harry continued to focus on completing his homework. As the holidays quickly approached, Harry found himself occupying more and more time in the library as he hammered out assignment after assignment in an effort to complete everything before the holiday deadlines. He usually sat by himself though on occasion the Trio or Ginny would join him, however, Harry preferred the silence and relaxation of working by himself. As he continued to describe differences in herbs on his Potions assignment, a slight cough distracted him.

"Hi Harry, do you mind if I sit with you? All the other tables seem busy," Cho asked. Harry noted that there seemed to be plenty of empty tables but did not voice his thoughts aloud.

"Yeah, sure, take a seat," Harry moved a couple of the heavier tomes from the seat across him. Surprisingly, Cho decided to take a seat right next to him. A slow heat was beginning to make its way up Harry's neck. He felt slightly uncomfortable but in a good way.

"Is that Potions? Snape can be so ruthless sometimes. I hate it," Cho commented.

"I know what you mean. Half the time I struggle just to make sure the potion's correct and the other half of the time I'm trying to make sure none of Snape's hair grease falls in it," Harry joked.

"Harry!" Cho laughed and swatted him lightly on the arm, "That's no way to talk about a Professor!"

"It's just Snape, I only have to worry about him at night when he comes out of his coffin."

Cho giggled again and shook her head, finally pulling out a couple of pieces of parchment to start her work. Harry could not deny that she was indeed beautiful. Frankly, Harry did not quite understand why she was studying with him of all people. For some strange reason though, Harry did feel quite comfortable with her. She had always been nice to Harry when they clashed on the pitch and by the looks of it, they seemed to get along well enough. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry spotted the Trio walking into the library. Well, it was more of Hermione walking into the library with Ron and Neville in tow. Hermione caught Harry out of the corner of her eye and started to walk towards him but abruptly stopped as she spotted Cho. There was only a second's pause before Hermione continued her long gait towards the pair.

"Hi Harry! Hi Cho," Hermione addressed them rather brightly.

"Hey Hermione," they both replied.

"Is that the Potions homework? I finished that last night. I disagreed with some of the clockwise and counter-clockwise directions that Snape suggested but otherwise it wasn't too bad," Hermione rushed out.

"I think I have it under control, thanks," Harry said with a curious grin.

"Yeah, Harry's been going at it for quite a while now," Cho chirped.

"Are you sure Harry? Some of the differences in herbs are hard to decipher if you didn't read the extra chapter in the text," Hermione pushed on.

"Got it right here," Harry pointed at the two lists on his parchment.

"Oh yeah, I remember that from last year, it looks all correct," Cho leaned over Harry's shoulder to point out the herbs.

"Erm, thanks," Harry said, acutely aware of Cho's proximity. He looked at Neville and Ron to gauge their reactions to this nonsense. Ron had his eyebrows raised as if to say, "Really?" while Neville had a contemplative look on his face.

"Well, looks like you have it under control then," Hermione said through pursed lips, "If you need any help though I'll - we'll - be right over there."

"Uh, thanks."

Hermione dragged Neville and Ron away, the latter of which gave him a sly wink. Puzzled, Harry turned back to Cho who gave him a flashing smile to which Harry responded in kind. Sneaking a look back at Hermione, Harry could not help the slight feeling of triumph beating in him.

"Do you want to go to Hogsmeade next weekend?" Harry blurted out.

"I'd love to!" Cho said, lightly touching his arm before turning back to her work.

"Cool, very cool."

"Hey Harry, want to come along with us to Honeydukes? There's these new things called 'Edible Parchments.' Seamus reckons he can feed one to Susan Bones," Dean asked.

"Is this before or after she tries to stab you in the eye?" Harry asked as he fixed his non-green tie.

"Preferably before but I'll take whatever I can get as long as she's eating out of my hand," Seamus chimed in.

Laughing, Harry shook his head as he readjusted his tie yet again, "No thanks, I'm meeting someone."

"Ooooooh," Seamus and Dean teased in unison.

"I did hear a rumor about you frolicking to Hogsmeade with Cho, but I have to hear it from the horse's mouth. Is it true?" Seamus inquired.

"Yeah, I'm going with Cho," Harry tried to play it off nonchalantly.

"Chooooo Chang," Seamus made a figure eight body shape with his hands and punctuated the motion with a hip thrust.

"Stay classy, Seamus," Harry said as he left the dorm room. As he hopped down the stairs two at a time, Harry almost barreled into Hermione for yet another time.

"Hermione!" Harry gasped, "Wotcher there."

"It's okay, no harm done," she smiled, "Off to Hogsmeade already?"

"Yeah, I'm sort of meeting someone there."

"Oh? Cho?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?" Harry asked.

"Oh. You know, I just know. I mean I didn't know - but - yeah I just knew," Hermione stuttered awkwardly.

"Uhhh, okay," Harry said with a nervous laugh, "I'll see you there maybe?"

"Yes, of course! Have to go get Neville and Ron first though," Hermione replied.

Of course you do.

They exchanged goodbyes and went their separate ways. After making his way to the entrance of the Great Hall, Harry spotted Cho with her friend Marietta Edgecombe. The pair were leaning into each other and talking quietly amongst the other students waiting to head down to Hogsmeade.

Please don't tell me Marietta is tagging along.

"Hey Cho. Hey Marietta," Harry greeted.

"Hello Harry," Marietta smiled that sort of smile girls have when they do not particularly want to say anything else to someone.

"Ready to go Cho?" Harry was eager to get away from this annoyance of a person.

"All set," Cho smiled. Cho looked quite pretty but not in an overly embellishing way. She wore a simple pair of tight jeans and a gray, low cut sweater.

Offer arm.

"Shall we?" Harry offered his arm, looking entirely less nervous than he actually felt.

"Of course," Cho smiled at him, patted his arm, and started to walk down the windy road to Hogsmeade.

Retract arm.

Sometime later, the pair were discussing the finer points of playing Seeker while having a bit of a drink at Three Broomsticks. Despite his initial reservations, Harry found himself quite enjoying this outing with Cho. Perhaps it was the admiring stares he received from his male counterparts or perhaps it was simply the fact that for once in his life, Harry could somehow talk to a girl (other than Ginny) without stuttering through the whole conversation.

"So you agree, right? Marking the other Seeker is a good strategy if you feel that you can't keep up," Cho asked Harry.

"Well, not necessarily. I think a better strategy is to always take the initiative and put the other Seeker on the back foot. Make them respond to you," Harry replied as he took a sip of his butterbeer.

"Well, we can't all be as good as you, Harry," Cho teased.

"You're really good too," Harry blushed.

"You're cute when you blush," Cho said over the rim of her butterbeer glass as she took a sip from the foamy substance.



"You're cute all the time," Harry quickly downed the rest of his drink, hopeful that his one good line of the night worked to his advantage. Cho simply smiled back while she took a sip of her drink. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry spotted the Trio entering the Inn and attempt to locate a proper booth.

"Why don't you invite them to sit with us?" Cho inquired.

"Oh. No, that's okay, they usually just sit by themselves anyways."

"Nonsense, hey Neville!" Cho waved her arm to signal the Trio their way. Neville appeared slightly surprised and looked to Hermione and Ron questioningly. Ron shrugged while Hermione slightly narrowed her eyebrows at Cho before slowly nodding. Hermione promptly sat next to Harry. Harry barely had time to scoot down the bench to make room for her and Neville. Ron took the spare spot on the opposite side of the booth with Cho.

"So, how is everyone?" Cho asked.

Neville and Ron opened their mouths to speak, but Hermione beat them to the punch, "Oh, we're great. We just came back from Tomes and Scrolls. I decided to buy 'Revolutionary: The Rise of Hodrod.' It's a fascinating look into the goblin world."

"I know, I read it last year already. Didn't you go with Harry to Tomes and Scrolls last time? I'm sure all your friends don't like spending too much time there," Cho gave a flighty laugh to indicate that she was joking. At least that's what Harry thought.

"Tell me about it Cho, Hermione always drags us around to these places," Ron exaggerated.

Hermione was burning red at this point, Neville was looking off into the distance while nervously pulling at his collar, and Harry was burying his face underneath another mug of butterbeer.

"Well, I thought you'd appreciate the novelty of important books, Cho. Revolutionary talks about how Hodrod the Horny-Handed shrunk those humans because they refused to allow him passage into the wand store. It's part of a series of events that led to the decree of 1631," Hermione blurted out in one breath.

"Hodrod didn't need to resort to violence to show his point. If the wizards didn't allow him in the wand store, all he had to do was simply file a complaint to the Ministry," Cho replied smoothly.

"The Ministry wouldn't have given him the time of day," Hermione said flippantly.

"But it would be far more legal than trying to shrink and smash three people into oblivion."

"That's besides the point," Hermione muttered. The three boys shifted uncomfortably, none of them knowing even the name of the goblin, Hodrod.

"Oh, I don't want to bore the boys with all this! Ron, you're a Canons fan aren't you? I'm sorry they lost to Puddlemere. It is Puddlemere though, best team in the league," Cho gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

"They spend more money on top players, of course they'd win," Ron grumbled in good natured fashion.

Cho laughed and turned her deep, brown eyes to Neville, "Neville do you have a team?"

"Oh," Neville was caught off guard, looking decidedly awkward, "Canons, I suppose."

"You should become a fan of Puddlemere like me! They like to win things every now and then," Cho winked at him.

"I suppose I could, but I don't fancy Ron trying to kill me in the wee hours of the night if the Canons lose to them," Neville half-smiled in Ron's direction.

"I think I'd kill you right after the match so no need to worry about that," Ron said to a smatter of laughs.

"What about you Hermione? Do you have a team?" Cho asked.

"No, I don't follow Quidditch," Hermione gritted between her teeth. Harry could practically feel the flames of anger radiating from her.

"What a shame."

"I know, Hermione would probably be in the library for game days if I wasn't playing," Ron boasted, swelling his chest like a rooster.

"Excuse me, Ronald. I cheer for Gryffindor. Not just you," Hermione glared.

"Of course, Harry's a marvelous flyer, I don't think I've ever beat him," Cho spoke of her date.

"Thanks," Harry had bowed out of the conversation long ago.

"How come you don't play Neville?" Cho asked him softly. Harry noted that Cho seemed to speak rather more endearingly to Neville than she did to either Ron or himself.

"Oh, I don't think I'm a natural at it like these two." Neville jerked his thumb towards Harry and Ron.

"Oh that's nonsense. I'd love to take you up flying one day," Cho leaned forward and pouted rather cutely.

"Um, yeah," Neville clearly was not expecting the invitation.

"Neville's busy with classes most of the time. It's hard work," Hermione cut in.

"Hermione, I'm not busy all the time -"

"I'm sure he can find an hour within a week -"

"Another butterbeer please?"

Neville, Cho, and Harry spoke up at the same time. At Harry's request, however, the other four compatriots in the booth turned to look at him questioningly.

"Need another one, I'm out," Harry shrugged.

"Anyways," Cho drawled, "I'd love to take you up flying Neville. Oh, if you could, I also need some help in DADA. Could you help me with that too?" Cho asked shyly.

I bet I could take him.

Harry grumbled in thought as he took a sip of his refilled drink. Neville looked a mix between uncomfortable and elated as he considered Cho's request. Hermione seemed to be doing her best to bury a hole through the table with her eyes while Ron gave a not so discreet thumbs up to Neville.

"Sure, I could help you," Neville replied softly.

"Thanks," Cho looked at Neville and it seemed as if a message had passed between the pair.

"Well, I'm going to get going," Harry stood up abruptly, "I think Marietta is here somewhere Cho. You can go back with her right?"

"Oh, of course Harry."

Of course.

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets as he trudged the winding pathway to Hogwarts by himself.

Harry laid his head down as he waited for Defense class to start. The previous night had been a fitful one as Neville had woken the dorm up repeatedly with his screams in his sleep. It's not that Harry did not sympathize with the boy, he just wished that he had cast a silencing charm around his bed.

Maybe he won't show up to defense.

The wicked voice within Harry grumbled as he tried to catch a quick nap. Luck was not in his fortune though as there was a heavy plop besides him. Turning his head, Harry was surprised to see Hermione sitting next to him.

"Hermione? What are you doing?" Harry asked.

"Sitting with you? Is that okay?" Hermione asked with no room for any response but yes. Harry shrugged, too tired to even be excited at the prospect of Hermione sitting next to him for the whole period.

Harry saw Ron and Neville file in moments later and make their way to Hermione, only to realize that the seat was occupied.

"Hermione?" Neville asked.

"What?" she replied shortly.

"Oh, nothing -"

"Why aren't you sitting with us?" Ron interrupted.

"Because I'd like to get some work done this period and I can't do it around you two so why don't you go talk about Quidditch or something really important," Hermione snapped. Harry shrugged at the pair, intent on not getting drawn into whatever torrid affair surrounded the threesome.

"Attention class!" Professor Sheppard commanded their attention.

"We'll start this right away so everyone can maybe get two turns at this lesson. I'll be splitting the class up into trios. Pairs are one thing but all of you will learn that there are usually more than four people fighting a war," Sheppard added a bit sarcastically.

"Longbottom, Granger, Crabbe."

Well that's a bit of an unfair group.

"Patil, Weasley, Zabini. Padma, I mean."

Much better.

"Finnegan, MacMillan, Corner."

Harry overheard Ron itching to have a go at that particular group, no doubt targeting Michael Corner.

"Thomas, Parkinson, Finch-Fletchley."

Would hate to be in that group.

Professor Sheppard droned the rest of the class on until he reached the last group, "Potter, Malfoy, Boot."

I hate you.

Harry groaned aloud, unable to mask his displeasure of being stuck with Malfoy yet again. Hermione looked at him sympathetically before trudging off rather unenthusiastically to her group. Harry made eye contact with Terry Boot and nodded at him. Terry seemed to be competent enough. Malfoy had remained seated in his chair across the room, pointedly ignoring Harry and Terry.

"Ignore him," Harry said as he approached the Ravenclaw.

"Don't worry, I already do," Terry replied dryly.

"Now take a step back. A lesson that needs to be learned today is to use your environment well. Most of the times you won't be fighting in clear, open spaces," Sheppard clapped his hands together three times and the staged dueling area suddenly transformed into a jagged array of chest high rocks. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry swore that Neville shivered ever so slightly.

"Same rules as before. Weasley, Patil, Zabini. Finnegan, MacMillan, Corner. Go!"

Harry watched as the two groups faced off against another. Spells were cast, but Harry's mind was drifting as if another source was pulling him away. Staring out the stained glass windows, Harry could only register the flash of lights in the background, too tired to care. Eventually the Weasley group won that particular duel, Ron particularly smug as he gave Michael Corner his wand back. Harry continued to tune out the next couple of duels, his mind in an unusual haze.

"Harry," Terry shook his shoulder, "We're up."

Snapping out of his reverie, Harry stepped down from the crowd of students into the dueling arena. Malfoy stepped into the arena lazily last. It was not until Harry finished rolling up his sleeves did he find that his opponents were none other than Neville, Hermione, and Crabbe.

Just my luck.

Harry looked to his left side where Malfoy was busy inspecting the dirt on his shoes.

"Malfoy, are you ready?"

"I'm not fighting, Potter."

"What do you mean you're not fighting," Harry hissed.

"Did I stutter?" Malfoy mocked. Harry barely had time to reply as he heard Professor Sheppard blow his whistle. As soon as the whistle had blown, Hermione sent three quick flicks of her wand their way, each flick exploding the ground in front of them. Harry immediately yanked Terry down by the collar of his shirt, hoping to avoid the spell fire. Malfoy, on the other hand, simply walked through the haze of dust.

"Malfoy! What are you doing?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Good luck with these two Potter," Malfoy laughed as he walked through the dust. A second later there was a Stupefy followed by a thud on the ground. Malfoy was down for the count.

"Load of help he was," Terry muttered underneath his breath.

Stick together.

"We have to stick together," Harry muttered, reflecting the voice within his head.

Harry quickly whipped his wand along the ground and sent out a clever spell that would make a loud gong as soon as someone stepped on the trigger area of five by five feet. It would buy them some time to recuperate from Hermione's initial volley. Quickly crawling over to a fallen stone, Harry motioned for Terry to do the same but at a slightly adjacent rock. It would do them no good to be blasted apart at the same rock. Harry was finally snapped out of his reverie.

Harry looked up as he saw Crabbe charging through the debris, his wand held high in what looked to be an incredulous gladiator pose. With a quickly aimed Stupefy, Terry quickly downed the dubious Slytherin boy. Unfortunately for Terry, two stunners immediately flew

in his direction as soon as he had cast his spell on Crabbe. Harry was helpless to stop the blue beams as they struck Terry. Neville and Hermione had effectively used the stupid Slytherin as bait.

"Well if that's how you want to play," Harry grumbled as he resituated himself behind another rock.

Harry flicked his wand to a direction he knew Neville and Hermione were not hiding within. The two rocks he aimed at immediately shattered into tiny pieces. A few spells immediately rocketed towards the area, giving Harry a general direction of the duo. Instead of firing a tester spell in that direction though, Harry moved laterally, trying to flank his opponent.

It may not be very courageous but the easiest way to defeat another wizard is to strike him where he's not looking.

His father's advice rang in his head as Harry quietly maneuvered his way into another advantageous position. He flicked his wand at another rock and shattered it to pieces as well. This time, there were no spells fired at the ruckus and Harry froze on the spot as he tried to reassess the fight. The dust was beginning to clear and it was only a matter of time before Harry would have to face off against the pair without the natural camouflage.

Harry had started out on the South side of the classroom while Neville and Hermione had started out on the North side of the classroom. After Terry and Malfoy had been downed, Harry had fired his distracter spells towards the East side of the room. The origin of the Stunners afterwards located the other pair still at the North. Harry had maneuvered himself to the West and shifted his focus to the left. The dust soon settled into a barely visible haze and Harry had to continually rub his glasses and keep a lookout for any movement.

GONG.

Harry's earlier trap had worked! Knowing where the area trigger spell was, Harry quickly fired a volley of stunners in that direction and followed it with another spell.

"Ventus!"



The gust of wind immediately blew the dust away and revealed Hermione and Neville pinned to the ground exactly where Harry had laid his trap. Leaping over the fallen boulder, Harry charged the pair with every hex he could think of, hoping to catch them off guard. Unfortunately for Harry, an errant blasting curse managed to hit the ground right in front of Hermione and immediately ricocheted the girl into the air. There was a sickening thud as Hermione landed awkwardly on her arm which was no doubt broken. Harry had barely time to feel sympathy as he realized he had just knocked her cold. Neville whipped around to face Harry, his eyes gleaming something fierce.

"You'll pay for that Potter."

Neville immediately unleashed a tidal wave of rather advanced curses Harry's way. Ducking and dodging, Harry managed to procure a shield in time to halt the onslaught. Neville did not relent and poured on the pressure, sending curses that Harry knew had not been taught in class.

"Protego Maxima!"

Harry's patented blue shield rose once again as he struggled to fight increasingly stronger curses. It was physically paining him to hold the shield as a medley of lights had engulfed the room. Neville sent a vicious purple laser his way and Harry watched as it pierced the shield and struck his left shoulder.

"Arggggh!"

Harry yelled as he immediately felt his skin light on fire where the curse had hit. His shield had dropped and Neville was moving in for the kill. Harry looked up to see that his dorm mate was grinning maniacally, his eyes a deep red.

"Mr. Longbottom! Stop this instance!" Sheppard yelled as he dropped the protective shield and rushed into the arena, his wand at the ready.

"No," Neville said. He waved his arm in the Professor's direction and Harry watched as Professor Sheppard was lifted off his feet and smashed against a wall. Neville approached Harry and raised his wand high.

"Imperio."

Harry felt a strange sensation, not unlike the haze he had felt before he participate in the duel. He was instructed to stand and did so, noting that the rest of the students watched in abject horror. Harry did not care.

Kill her.

A gleeful voice directed Harry's attention to a prone Hermione Granger. Harry took a step towards her and raised his wand. After a moment though, he lowered his wand and faced a red-eyed Neville Longbottom.

But I don't want to.

There was a surge of power as Harry felt the haze leave his mind. At that very moment, Neville was rocked backwards as if he were hit by an oncoming freight train. As Harry snapped out of his daze, he approached the fallen boy and tried to shake him awake.

"Neville, are you okay?"

Neville opened his eyes, no longer red, and tiredly looked at Harry, "He's very happy."

A/N: Excuse any typos/grammatical mistakes. Just banged this one out in a hurry.

A/N: I own nothing, blah blah. Special shout out to Tank03 and AgricultureKid for their help and lengthy reviews.

Harry groaned as he felt the sunlight pouring through the windows of the Hospital Wing. Wincing slightly, Harry made sure not to roll over on his injured arm. The curse that had struck his shoulder was not easily mended and required an overnight stay for the rather beleaguered boy. Harry became still, however, at the sound of mingled voices in the room.

"Dumbledore, he used wandless magic to propel me across the room and he wasn't even trying! For Merlin's sake, he used an Unforgivable against a student!" Harry could discern the voice of Professor Sheppard even from his bed.

"Jack, Mr. Longbottom was not himself at that moment. I've reviewed not only his memories but others as well. All indications point to the fact that Mr. Longbottom had no recollection of ever casting an Unforgivable," Dumbledore explained in a calm voice.

"Well what am I supposed to do? Whether or not he remembers, Longbottom cast an Unforgivable on another student! What am I supposed to tell the Ministry?" Sheppard was practically yelling at this point.

"You must stay quiet in this Hospital Wing and in the future, Professor," Dumbledore commanded.

"How can I stay quiet when there's a potential time bomb within these walls?" Sheppard hissed.

"I assure you, many steps are being taken to make sure this does not happen any time soon with Mr. Longbottom," Dumbledore's tone indicated that this conversation was finished.

"You mark my words, Dumbledore. Longbottom can't contain the beast. It will rear it's ugly head again and we won't be fortunate enough in the future to have the boy collapse on the spot. You-Know-Who is getting stronger every day," Sheppard pleaded.

"Voldemort," Dumbledore gave special emphasis to the name, "will not have Mr. Longbottom."

There was a huff and a swish of robes before heavy stomps exited the ward. Harry assumed that the agitated Professor had left the matter to rest for now. Harry carefully lifted one of the drapes surrounding the bed to see who else was outside.

"The Professor makes a point. According to the students, Longbottom not only used several dark curses to take down Mr. Potter but also brushed off Sheppard like he was a fly," McGonagall's usually even keeled voice cracked with anxiety.

"What caused it?" she asked.

"Before Mr. Longbottom collapsed, he apparently told Mr. Potter 'He was very happy,' Dumbledore sighed.

"Voldemort was happy?" McGonagall asked in a scared whisper.

"I'm afraid so," Harry could see Dumbledore rub his forehead very slowly.

"I think the combination of the arena resembling the Riddle graveyard and the sudden surge of Tom's happiness allowed him brief access to Mr. Longbottom's mind," Dumbledore reasoned.

"But how was he able to be stopped?" the Transfiguration Professor asked.

"I'm not entirely sure. Perhaps Tom could only hold on to the tenuous connection for but a moment. Perhaps Neville was strong enough to fight him off," the older Professor mused, twirling the hair on his grey beard.

"Still? What can we do Albus? The children will talk. Mr. Longbottom still performed an Unforgivable in a classroom full of students," McGonagall was more genuinely worried than Harry had ever seen her.

"I shall have to make some inquiries within the Ministry. It is important that Neville not be removed from Hogwarts. To do so would allow Tom even more access to his mind. That is unacceptable," he responded gravely.

"For now, we must insure that Neville is able to block out Tom. That is of the utmost importance."

Harry laid his head back down and closed the drapes as he tried to process the rush of information he received from Dumbledore. Apparently, You-Know-Who had access to Neville's mind.

You-Know-Who has access to Neville's mind.

Wait.

YOU-KNOW-WHO HAS ACCESS TO NEVILLE'S MIND?

Harry sat up suddenly without thinking and immediately the effects of such a foolish decision. Dizziness overtook him and the searing pain of his shoulder reminded him of the pain he was suffering. With a loud groan, he collapsed back onto the bed, no doubt gaining the Headmaster's attention.

"I think that Mr. Potter is awake," came the bemused voice of the aforementioned professor.

Don't mind me, I'm just making sure conduits for psychotic murderers aren't around me.

"Mr. Potter, how are you feeling?" McGonagall asked, her voice laced with concern.

"I'll manage," Harry grunted gruffly.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Potter, there's some questions I'd like to ask you about your practice duel," Dumbledore intoned softly.

"Uh, sure."

"Do you remember telling me that Neville said a sentence right before he faded?"

"Yeah," Harry recited what Neville had said word for word.

"Was there anything else?" Dumbledore pressed.

"No, that's all he said."

"Can you give me your exact recount of the events leading to Neville regaining...control," Dumbledore paused at the end of the sentence, seemingly struggling to find the right words.

"We were just dueling as usual. I - I didn't mean to - but I knocked Hermione out cold," Harry started guiltily, "After that, Neville sort of lost control. He started performing these hexes that I didn't even know of. I put up a shield, but I couldn't keep it up for forever. They were very advanced, sir."

Dumbledore nodded for Harry to continue.

"Whatever curse he used broke through my shield charm and hit me in the shoulder. He came up to me. His eyes were so red. He cast Imperio on me," Harry droned on, his eyes glazing over as he recounted the events in a dull monotone.

"He told me to kill her, but I didn't want to. Then it was gone."

"You didn't want to?"

"The voice in my head said to kill Hermione. I couldn't do it," Harry said softly, his head twisting about to see if Hermione was also in one of the hospital beds. Unfortunately, all the drapes around the beds were closed.

"That was a great feat of yours Harry. Not everyone can fight off an Imperius curse. Is there anything else?" Dumbledore prodded.

Tell him.

"I saw him."

"Saw who?"

"You-Know-Who."

"Pardon?"

"You-Know," Harry stopped, "V-v-v - him."

"Voldemort?"

"Yes."

"You saw Voldemort in your head?"

"I saw two red eyes. I saw pale claws as grey as the wall. I saw into his head. I saw a tower," Harry whispered fearfully.

"A tower?" Dumbledore looked genuinely shocked.

"A tower stretching high into the sky, blotting out the sun. What does it mean Professor?"

"Nothing you should concern yourself with right now Mr. Potter. Get some rest," Dumbledore stood abruptly, his face stony.

"But Professor -" Harry started.

"I must go," Dumbledore cut him off, "There are matters I must attend to. Have a speedy recovery, Mr. Potter."

Dumbledore practically ran out of the Hospital Wing, his usually calm demeanor shattered by what ever that tower meant. Lying his head back down, Harry was afraid to close his eyes. Every time his eyes were shut, all he saw were those two red slits. Shivering slightly, Harry wrapped the blanket tight around his uninjured shoulder, rolling over and facing another bed.

"Neville? Hermione?"

There was no response. Not for the first time, Harry felt utterly alone, unable to talk about the craziness he just experienced. Willing his eyes to stay open, he thought back to Dumbledore's reaction. What was the tower? Whatever the tower was, it was incredibly large. Although the glimpse into You-Know-Who's mind was short, Harry retained the sharp image of a lone, dark tower. Why was Dumbledore so incensed by this tower? He had to know what the tower was or at least what the tower represented. Harry had known Dumbledore for a while; he often visited his mother when Harry was younger. Harry had never seen Dumbledore so genuinely - scared.

"Harry!"

Ginny rushed to his bedside, the bags clearly evident underneath her eyes. She stopped at his side for a moment to take a deep breath, clearly looking as if she had run all the way from Gryffindor tower.

"You look like a turtle," were the first words she said to him.

"What?"

"You're stuck on your side. You look like a turtle," she said breathlessly.

"I've been hit by an Unforgivable. My shoulder is burned. All you can say is that I look like a turtle?" Harry said dead-panned.

"I call it like I see it."

"You're an idiot."

Ginny nodded, not really agreeing with his accusation but rather nodding because she realized that Harry was still okay.

"How are you feeling really?"

"Shit. You?"

"Scared to death, you imbecile!" Ginny yelled.

"I didn't do anything!" Harry was taken aback by the sudden change of voice.

"What exactly happened? The rumors are flying around, Ron's too shell shocked to talk, and the three of you are stuck up here without visitors until now. Hell, I just saw Dumbledore sprint to his office! What have you done?" Ginny finally released her tirade.

"I didn't do anything!" Harry was mildly offended.

"Mr. Potter! Ms. Weasley! Keep it down before I ask you to leave," Madam Pomfrey hushed.

"I didn't do anything," Harry whispered fervently, "Something happened to Neville and he sort of lost it."



"Is he okay? Where is he?" she whirled around trying to find him.

"Somewhere," Harry started cautiously.

"What do you mean he lost it?" Ginny asked.

"Ginny - don't freak - but he sort of cast Imperio on me."

"Excuse me?" Ginny said as if Harry had offended her personally. Harry nodded back, assuring her that he wasn't misspeaking.

"Neville? Why would he do that?"

Harry lowered his eyes to the floor before replying, "I don't know."

Harry knew full well, now, why Neville had cast that particular curse. It was not his place to reveal this information to all of his closest friends though. He thought he would leave that up to the cursed boy himself.

"Are you okay?" she finally asked.

"Well, I'm fine now thank you," Harry rolled his eyes.

"Harry? Ginny?" came a female voice from the other side of the room.

"Hermione!" Ginny gasped. Harry watched as she ran to the other side of the bed to which Harry could not turn.

Oh come on.

The flurry of voices behind him did indeed indicate that Hermione was to his back. Harry turned ever so slightly onto his back, wincing as his shoulder came in contact with the softness of the bed. He settled with rotating his head sideways to see Hermione sitting up in her bed, talking to Ginny animatedly.

"Why is Neville here? Why is Harry here? Ginny, what happened?" Hermione posed a flurry of questions. Ginny shrugged and pointed to Harry.

Thanks.

"Harry? Are you okay? What happened to your shoulder?"

Apparently, Hermione did not like being left out of the loop.

"What was the last thing you remembered?" Harry asked.

"You trapped us. Pretty clever actually," Hermione frowned, "A blasting curse exploded right in front of me and kind of propelled me into the air. I don't remember anything after that."

Sighing, Harry ran his free hand through his hair, cursing the fates for burdening him with the task of telling Hermione, "Something happened to Neville. He hit me with a couple of really strong spells."

Ginny raised an inquisitive eyebrow at his obvious omissions. Harry kept his face straight, hoping that Hermione would gloss over the details and hopefully ask Neville later what had happened. Then, Harry remembered who Hermione was.

"What sort of spells?"

Shit.

"I don't exactly remember. Most of them were wordless," Harry dodged.

"Wordless? Neville can't do wordless spells yet," Hermione mused confusedly.

Resigning himself to his fates Harry spoke, "Hermione, something happened to Neville. Something got into his head."

Harry hoped that Hermione would catch on to what he was saying. Ginny looked confused as she stared back and forth between the pair. Hermione was looking off into the distance, her mind no doubt pushing into high gear as she tried to decipher Harry's not so cryptic message. She opened her mouth to speak but closed it, apparently not liking what she was about to say. Then, her head snapped towards Harry, her face a picture of realization. Jumping up from her bed, much to Ginny's admonitions, she padded her way over to Harry.

"Voldemort?" she whispered, leaning close to insure Ginny did not overhear. Harry nodded grimly.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Neville or You-Know-Who?"

Hermione did not find it the least bit amusing.

"I don't know, he hasn't woken yet I think."

"Hermione?" came a groggy voice from Harry's left.

Hermione immediately rushed over to Neville's side, much to Harry's slight displeasure. Must that boy always come first in everything in her life? Harry watched as she sat on his bedside and took his hand.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, concern laced in her voice.

"I think I'm okay. How did I end up here?" Neville asked, obviously unaware of his surroundings. Hermione shook her head and patted his hand.

Great. I happen to follow her out of slightly obsessive concern through the Whomping Willow and get a third-degree burn from her. He casts an Unforgivable on me and gets a pat on the hand. That's fair.

"Harry? What are you doing here?" Neville asked, his eyes squinting in concern.

"Ran into a door. Hurt my shoulder a bit."

"Harry," Ginny scolded.

"What?" Harry said in fake irritability.

Ginny and Hermione looked sourly upon him, but Harry did not care at the moment. Did neither of them recognize the danger of someone with a potentially unstable mind? Neville could burst out into the Death Eater anthem right for all they knew.

"Can someone tell me what's going on?" Neville asked. For the third time that day, Harry had to repeat the story that apparently could not be told by anyone else in the entire world. While he retold the duel yet again, Harry could not quite meet Neville's eyes. Images of Neville cursing him kept flashing in Harry's head as he went slowly through the story.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. You have to know - I would - I can't - I don't even know how to do that," Neville stuttered.

"It's okay, I know it wasn't you," Harry did not meet his eyes regardless. Neville seemed to catch on to what Harry was doing and started to shift nervously.

"Maybe I should go," he stole a glance over at Harry to see the boy had his eyes rooted on the floor.

"Madam Pomfrey? Am I okay to go?" Neville asked.

"Since you don't have any actual injuries, you're free to go. You as well, Ms. Granger. Your arm is fully healed. Mr. Potter, on the other hand, must stay a little longer for your shoulder. I don't know what Professors allow in their classrooms these days," the witch clucked. Neville and Hermione stood and gathered their belongs, all the while Harry ignoring them. As Neville turned to leave, he seemed to gather himself together and addressed the elephant in the room.

"Harry. You have to know, I would never do that to you," he pleaded.

"I know it wasn't you, Neville. I already said it's okay."

"Then why won't you look me in the eye?"

"I don't fancy You-Know-Who having a go at my head again," Harry gulped. Ginny and Hermione gasped while Neville looked pale, his hands balling into fists.

"It wasn't me!" Neville yelled.

"I don't care if it wasn't you! I just don't want another bloody Unforgivable to be thrown at me!" Harry protested.

"It wasn't me, it was Voldemort."

"Well then keep You-Know-Who out of your head then," Harry was starting to lose his cool.

"Call him Voldemort!" Neville suddenly demanded as he took a step forward despite Hermione's restraint.

"I'LL CALL HIM WHATEVER THE BLOODY HELL I WANT TO," Harry bellowed.

The glasses of water placed upon the bedsides suddenly exploded in a brilliant shower. The girls shrieked as they attempted to avoid the tiny fragments but they need not worry for the glass stood suspended in mid-air like a low gravity simulation before plummeting to the ground.

"What is going on here?" Madam Promfrey asked, her hands on her hips as she took in the scene.

"Nothing!" Hermione yelled, "We were just leaving."

Hermione was pulling Neville by his arm as he stared down Harry. Harry, for his part, kept his head down while he tried to regain his calm. Ginny just stood there with her mouth open at the display while Hermione gave one more pleading glance to Harry as she tugged on Neville's arm.

"It won't happen again, it won't happen again," Neville muttered as the pair disappeared out of sight.

"What the hell was that?" Ginny demanded once Pomfrey was out of earshot.

"What do you think?" Harry shot back nastily.

"I think both of you have gone bonkers!"

"Only one of us," Harry said darkly.

"What?"

"Ginny, do you remember second year? Your first year?" Harry probed.

Ginny instantly stiffened, her lips tightening and her jaw clenching. She instinctively knew what Harry was going to say at the moment and shook her head, indicating she did not need a further example. Harry sighed and looked at the pieces of broken glass surrounding his bed.

"It's something like that I think," he said sadly. Ginny shuddered and closed her eyes. Harry could make out her lips counting to ten silently.

"Can we talk about something else?" she asked.

"Ginny, this is important. You don't know what I saw in that guy's mind," Harry pointed out.

"I don't care!" she yelled, her eyes full of desperation, "Can we please talk about something else?"

After a moment, Harry told her softly, "Okay, what do you want talk about?"

"Cho," she said.

"Cho? After all this you want to talk about Cho?" he asked skeptically.

"I don't want to talk about him," she gritted her teeth.

"Fair enough."

"Hermione," she started shakily, 'came to me after Hogsmeade. She told me what happened."

"Yeah, so?"

"Harry, I know I was trying to help you but I think Cho's playing you," she said.

"Why would she do that?" Harry asked, feeling a bit threatened by the line of this conversation.

"I think she wants to know Neville better," she gently prodded.

"Neville, Neville, Neville. Everything's always about him. What is that you said? Why wouldn't she like me?" Harry said, his voice full of scorn.

"Well you don't need to be a prick about it," Ginny put a hand to her chest, "I'm just saying I know Cho and she's just using you."

"And what if she just likes me and she was nervous?" Harry challenged.

"Harry, you stupid boy," Ginny leaned forward and placed her hand on his, "I just don't want to see you getting hurt by some manipulative bitch."

Harry stared at her hand on his confusedly. It was unlike Ginny to show so much affection even in private. Nervously, he moved his hand out from underneath hers under the guise of rubbing his sore arm before replying.

"I'm not being manipulated. I can handle Cho on my own," he said grumpily. Ginny stared at him for a moment with sad eyes before shaking her head.

"Whatever Harry. I'll be back in a bit with some food for you. Stay put," she commanded as she left the Wing.

Girls.

Sometime after Ginny had brought him a late lunch, Pomfrey finally cleared him to leave. It was already late by the time he started to head back to the Gryffindor common room. He was in a particularly foul mood and kept his head down as he navigated his way through the labyrinth of Hogwarts. With his head down, he was unable to foresee the collision around the corner of one corridor.

"Watch it!" Harry snapped.

"Sorry!" the other person exclaimed at the same moment.

"Cho?"

"Harry?"

Great.

"Sorry," Harry grumbled, "wasn't watching where I was going."

"Oh, it's okay!" Cho replied hastily, "I've been meaning to talk to you anyways."

"Really? What are you doing here anyways; the Ravenclaw room isn't anywhere near here," Harry pondered.

"Yeah - well - how are you? I heard about what happened. It must have been awful," Cho cut him off but looked genuinely concerned.

"I'm alright now," Harry was glad that at least someone was paying attention to his injuries.

"That's good. That's good," she repeatedly mostly to herself, "Harry, I just wanted to apologize for - well - kind of ignoring you at Hogsmeade. I know it was terribly rude of me."

Harry shrugged indifferently, "Happens all the time."

"No," she said forcefully, "It's just that...Neville avoids me all the time and I think it's because of Cedric and I just wanted to know - or just - talk to him about that. You were great before they came to the table."

Harry nodded, unsure of how he should reply.

"I just wanted to make it up to you. Are you going home for the holidays?" she asked.

"Yeah, I usually do."

"Oh," she said disappointedly, staring at the ground.

"I'll be back soon enough though. Hogsmeade again afterwards?" Harry offered.

"Yes," she said brightly.



Harry snorted softly and gave her a half-smile, "Alright then. It's a date."

"Yes it is," she smiled her beautiful smile at him. She paused for a moment as if she were fighting some internal battle before quickly tip toeing forward and giving him a soft peck on the lips.

"I'll see you after the break," she rushed out before turning around and sprinting towards

Harry held a hand to his lips as she disappeared around the corner, too shell shocked to move from the spot. It was not until much, much later when he retired for the night did he realize that he had officially received his first kiss.

Harry woke up in the morning before his departure from Hogwarts in a much brighter mood. He had woken up much earlier than the rest of his dorm mates, however, in order to escape seeing Neville. Dressing as quickly as he could, Harry made his way down the stairs for an early shot at breakfast. He did not expect Hermione to be sitting in one of the armchairs this early in the morning.

"Harry," she called out as he tried to rush to the portrait.

Dammit. No.

"Hermione," he said warily.

What's my life come to? I'm avoiding Hermione now for Merlin's sake.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm alright," he replied, still on guard. She scrunched her face at the slightly cool tone of his voice but pressed forwards. Harry did feel slightly guilty for being so off putting but only for a moment as he remembered her treatment of him in the past few weeks or so.

"Look, I know it's hard to understand what Neville's going through right now. He's as scared as you are about this whole thing," she started, "But believe me, he's incredibly sorry about what happened."

"Hermione," Harry felt as if he were explaining things that no one was understanding, "I already forgave him. Just please understand that it's difficult for me to try to cope with You-Know-Who bouncing around in someone's head."

"I know. I know," she bit her lip uncertainly, "But can you please give him a little break, for me?"

She laid a hand gently on his forearm and pleaded forgiveness with her eyes. No matter how angry he was at her, Harry could not help but waver in his stance. The sight of her asking for his help was refreshing for once.

"I'm not making any promises," he gruffly replied, "Even I don't respond well to being cursed."

"I won't go yelling at him if that's what you want."

"Well, it's a start," Hermione said with a small smile on her face.

"And know that I'm only doing this for you," Harry stated, not knowing where this boldness was hiding all his life.

"I know," she smiled coyly. Harry looked questioningly at her, but she simply turned around to gather some of her books before he could say anything.

"Are you going down to breakfast? If you are, I'll come with you."

"Yeah, sure," Harry said distractedly.

They made slight small talk as they made their way down to the Great Hall. There were a couple of other early birds as Harry dug in to his breakfast eggs, but they were mostly alone. Ginny tiredly came down a little after them, complaining that Harry had not told her he came back from the Hospital Wing already.

"I'll make sure I keep you informed of all my movements," Harry said sarcastically.

"Prat," she swatted him on the arm but had a smile on her face.

Harry helped himself to some juice as more students piled into the Great Hall. Ginny and Hermione were idly chit chatting over him as he zoned out for a moment. Harry felt Hermione suddenly tense beside him and Harry looked up to see what had caused her to stiffen. Neville eyed the three of them before slowly making his way to the group. He sat across from the three of them and eyed Harry warily. Harry looked up from his breakfast for a moment and gave him a slight head nod, the universal indication that everything was okay between them. Neville responded in kind and dug into his breakfast as well.

"Oh good, looks like we can all get along then!" Ginny chirped brightly, the boys' interaction not lost upon her. Hermione said nothing but smiled as she read the Daily Prophet.

Harry was finally settling into a good morning before a loud screech interrupted the proceedings. Looking up, Harry's heart plummeted as he saw a large, horned owl once again carrying a blue, periwinkle letter. It made a lap around the Great Hall as the students waited in anticipation. The owl continued to look over its targets, seemingly mocking the group as if it were all a game. The bird swayed to and fro as it made another circle around the Great Hall, it's elevation lowering the whole time.

The owl suddenly adjusted direction for the Slytherin table and Harry watched with rapt fascination as all the Slytherins suddenly stirred in their seats. Harry hoped that the prat, Malfoy, would be the recipient of this particular letter. At the last moment though, the owl changed course and abruptly made a sharp turn for the Gryffindor table. Harry dropped his spoon as he watched the bird slowly make its way towards him. Harry locked eyes with the bird and swore that the damn thing was determined to drop the letter right in his meal. Harry closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

But it never came.

Peeking out with one eye, Harry was surprised to see that the letter was not for him. He turned his head to see the large, horned owl leaving the Great Hall without a letter between it's talons. The bird had indeed given the letter to someone, but who? Turning to his right to ask Ginny, Harry froze as he spotted the tell tale blue in Ginny's hands. He blinked in disbelief as Ginny slowly turned to him.

"It's for me."

A/N: Thanks to Andor Swiftblade for the amusing 3am review and to NOC for some rather interesting theories. Warning: the latter half of this chapter may be graphic for some people (and a walk in the park for others). You have been warned.

"You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war" -Einstein

Harry often wondered whether or not the War even existed. Sure, he had read about the deaths and attacks in the Daily Prophet but reading the newspaper was akin to watching a movie on one of those Muggle tellies. It was easy to read about John who-it-is or Mary whats-her-face on the ends of the killing curse. For all Harry knew, the War could be just some sort of fantasy creation by the Ministry in order to garner more hands in the office. For all Harry knew, the War was simply an imagination to keep students in school and out of trouble. For all Harry knew, the War was just an excuse to keep the populace fearful of an invisible power.

But Harry now knew the War was indeed real.

"I - I - just don't understand," Ginny sobbed, surrounded by her solemn brothers, "Why - why is it me?"

The Gryffindor common room resembled a funeral parlor. It might as well been with the sheer desolation blanketing and threatening to suffocate the room. As Ginny gasped for air, the whole of Gryffindor gasped with her, already mourning the death of one of their own.

"I'm not even fifteen!" Ginny wailed, breaking down to hysterics as Harry watched her descend to a level he had never seen.

"Don't worry Ginny, we'll fix this," said brave Fred.

"We're not going to let you go, we'll go instead," encouraged courageous George.

Their words of supposed comfort only led to more tears for the youngest Weasley. Ron looked stonily into the fire, his expression murderous. In the corner, Harry could spot Lavender and Parvati crying and holding on to each other. Harry could not stop the lump in his throat from rising as he awkwardly patted Ginny on the back.

"They can't make me go," Ginny muttered as she stared at her hands, "I'm too young."

The Weasley clan looked at each other for comfort but only found questions. Ginny was far and away the youngest student conscripted into this make shift Wizard army. The fact that she had been selected over a countless number of more qualified students added to the mystery and shock. Hermione, bless the girl, sat ruminating at Ginny's feet.

"It doesn't make sense," Hermione whispered.

"Damn right it doesn't!" Fred exclaimed angrily.

"Dumbledore has to be able to do something about this," Ron said with questioning eyes.

"Dumbledore will know," Neville agreed grimly.

"It's settled then, we're going to Dumbledore," said George. The Weasley clan were quickly gathering arms to protect their precious child and even Ginny had a tiny, shimmering glint of hope in her watershed eyes. Harry hoped that they would not let her down.

"We'll go too," Dean and Seamus announced simultaneously.

"So will we," whispered a teary Lavender.

"Me too!" cried a Sixth year.

One by one, the whole Gryffindor common room eventually announced their plans to appeal to Dumbledore for Ginny not to be sent to almost certain death. Harry's heart swelled at the show of unity from the Gryffindor House as they piled out of their portrait to the Headmaster's office. The steady marching of their feet resembled a raucous pack of protesters, ready to rage war for their own. They marched steadily, adorned with grim faces. Ginny was in the center of the group as the rest of the House did their best to shield her from invisible harm. As they reached the gargoyles to the Headmaster's office, they realized that none of them knew the password.

"How do you think we get in?" whispered Neville.

"Password," Hermione promptly replied. To their great surprise, the gargoyle stepped aside to reveal a man in a bowler hat. A man in a green bowler hat; Cornelius Fudge.

"Well, what do we have here?" he asked, not unlike one of those insidious pedophiles faced with a new litter of children.

"Cornelius!" yelled Dumbledore's voice from behind the Minister of Magic. The old Professor looked a bit worn for wear as he reached the bottom step and found himself facing almost the entirety of Gryffindor.

"Children, you must go back," he pleaded.

"No! No!" admonished Fudge, "Look how proud they are of their prize student! They're here to send her off."

The smile on Fudge's face could not have been any wider nor could it have not provoked any more vicious of a reaction from the Gryffindor faithful. Harry could feel the magic radiating from the Weasley twins as well as see the sparks fly from the tip of Ron's wand.

"Send her off?" George spat.

"Why yes, Mr. Weasley. Your sister should be honored to receive such a privilege to serve her Ministry," Fudge explained.

"Honored? She's not even fifteen!" Ron roared.

"Well -" the Minister started to fluster, "-sacrifices must be made in order to serve the good of the people. No one is out of the question."

There was a loud uproar by the students as they threatened various parts of his body with gruesome torture. The Headmaster tried to placate his students but it was to no avail as the crowd wanted blood. Harry could feel the anger growing within the mob and joined in the taunts as well.

"SILENCE!" bellowed the Headmaster, his wand at his throat to amplify his voice.

"Dumbledore! You can't possibly let Ginny go!" Hermione implored, "She's not of age. She's not even - no offense Ginny - well qualified to fight on the front lines!"

"Why - I never - the nerve - she will not be directly on the front lines. She'll serve in support of course," Fudge was taken aback as if Ginny fighting was the most unreasonable conclusion in the entirety of the world. Suddenly, something clicked in Harry's head.

"You hand picked her, didn't you?" Harry accused, his mind recounting the argument between the Headmaster and the Minister when Harry and Neville were stuck in the centaur trap. The Minister flushed with outrage but all Harry had to do was look at Dumbledore for confirmation. The old man hung his head.

"You wanted more students for the War because you thought the Professor was building an army! You wanted to make an example out of someone! This isn't random!" Harry started to gain steam.

"The youth must serve their Ministry," Fudge started to back up behind his bodyguards.

"So you're just going to send a little girl off to the lines just to make an example out of her?" Hermione screeched, clearly incensed.

"Everyone must serve," Fudge muttered as he cowered by his bodyguards.

"I'll show you how to serve," grumbled Ron as he brandished his wand. There was a cacophony of sparks as spells were immediately cast to and from Fudge. The resulting scuffle had the remaining Weasley clan down on the ground as Aurors restrained them to the best of their abilities. Fudge kept muttering and scurried away with the rest of his bodyguards back to the Ministry to the disbelief of the rest of the Gryffindor populace.

"Professor, you can't let him do that!" begged Hermione.

"Please Professor," whispered an inconsolable Ginny. The aged wizard approached the tiny redhead and crouched down, his knees creaking in protest.



"I am so sorry, my child. It should not be your burden to bear," he creaked, tears in his eyes. Ginny's lip wobbled as she took in the news that not even the greatest wizard of the century could stop this unfathomable decision. Turning, she fled.

The train ride home was morbid . Fred and George spent the ride trying to cheer Ginny up to no avail. They even went so far as to say that the Ministry would no longer be concerned with Neville casting an Unforgivable now that they had Ginny on their side. This suggestion did not help at all. Harry slouched gloomily against the window pane of glass, staring out at the mockingly bright day. The news had reached the Weasley parents quickly as they were both at the platform when the train finally arrived. Ginny immediately ran into her father's arms, sobbing hopelessly the whole way. Harry could distantly hear Mrs. Weasley promising all her brothers would come home and try to alleviate the situation. Harry doubted anything could be done. As he approached his own mother, Harry noted that Lily looked furious as she stared at the morose family.

"This is bullshit," Harry stated frankly.

"The Minister's gone too far," Lily spat out the name and did not even admonish her son's curse. Harry knew she felt strongly about the recruitment of students.

"There has to be something we can do," Harry begged.

"I'm looking into everything I can Harry," she replied with a steely look on her face.

Harry walked back to the Weasley family who were still wrapped in various consoling hugs. Ginny caught him out of the corner of her eye and wrenched herself from her father and mother's grasp only to throw herself at him in a crying ball of heap.

"Tell me this is a dream," she whispered into his chest.

"It's all a dream," Harry lied, "You'll wake up and I'll still be trying to figure out Hermione, Fred and George will still be pranking teachers, and Ron will still be planning out Quidditch matches."

Ginny hiccupped into his chest as she clutched him tighter, "Please see me before I go."

"I will."

Ginny released Harry and awkwardly patted him on the shoulder. Harry watched as the Weasleys formed a protective shell around the only daughter as they started their retreat to the Burrow. He caught Hermione and Neville looking on and approached the pair.

"Do you think there's anything we can really do? There has to be some sort of legal precedence," Harry asked Hermione. The girl could only shake her head mutely.

"I'll get Padfoot to look into things," whispered Neville. Harry nodded at him before sticking his hand out for a handshake. Neville took his hand, still looking at the Weasley family's retreating backs. Hermione pulled him in for a tight hug before Harry departed for Godric's Hollow.

There's no place like home.

Harry loved Godric's Hollow. He loved the countryside that stretched for miles and miles into the distance. He loved watching the sun rise from his bedroom, the combination of bleeding red and orange skipping across the horizon. There was nothing more enjoyable than relaxing in his comfortable, plush chair as he finished his summer work. There was nothing more pleasing to the ears than the sound of his mother clanging about in the kitchen downstairs while she concocted some sort of dinner for him. He would never really be quite as complete until he would return home; through the swinging wooden gate and up the staircase into his beloved room.

But Harry was not enjoying his time at home; all he could think of was that blasted Fudge. His mother had always told him that Fudge was terribly unfit for the job. He was a politician in the worse way possible, able to bend and stretch for whoever posed a threat to his office. His drive was not to help serve the people but to keep office for as long as possible. It was an unenviable trait that bookmarked a rather malevolent time in wizard politics. While it was not Harry's place to particularly explore the demented area of politicians, Harry could not help but fume at Fudge's rhetoric. Why send a child simply to further an agenda? Were there no morals? No costs? Harry had half a mind of sending a rather scathing howler to the Minister of

Magic, but he was unfortunately interrupted by noises downstairs. Leaping up from his prone position in his bed, he checked outside and saw a couple of figures in robes make their way through the swinging wooden gate. Their hoods were pulled over their head but Harry could make out a taller figure and two more slender bodies. Leaping down the stairs two at a time, Harry called out.

"Dad! Is that you? Dad, you have to do something about..." Harry trailed off as the taller person pulled back the hood of his cloak.

"Professor Snape?" Harry quizzed, "What are you doing here, sir?"

The other two compatriots remained hidden with their heads bowed. Harry looked at them curiously as he watched the Potions Professor look around the foyer.

"Mr. Potter, can you please retrieve your mother for me?" Snape droned in that deathly monosyllabically tone.

"Of course," Harry responded, still curious as to the meaning of the Professor's visit. Had something happened?

"Mum! Professor Snape's here!" Harry called out as he poked his head into the kitchen.

"Severus?" Lily asked with a rather surprised look on her face. Harry simply nodded in response.

"Severus? What's the meaning of this?" Lily asked as she wiped her hands with a hand towel. Snape stood silently before giving the slightest flick of his wrist towards the hidden pair. As soon as they pulled back the hood, Harry could immediately spot the tell tale shimmering blond of hair fixed upon their heads.

"Malfoy?" Harry asked incredulously.

The ignorant boy was bleeding around the eyes and seemed to have a large, purple bruise marking the entire left side of his face. His jaw was set, his eyes challenging as he dared Harry to say any more. Beside him, Malfoy's mother was relatively unscathed but wore a desperate expression on her face. Next to him, Harry heard his mother gasp as she took in Malfoy and his mother. Harry's mind

raced with possibilities, a tinge of fear running through him as he remembered that his wand was still on his bedside table.

"No," Harry blurted the first words that reached his mouth.

"Harry -"

"Mr. Potter -"

Lily and Snape reproached him at the same time but it was to no avail as Harry continued to shake his head in denial.

"Do you know who he is?" Harry spit out.

"Mr. Potter, please," Narcissa Malfoy softly spoke.

Harry gulped, not used to being dressed down by someone he just met. While he recognized Malfoy's mother (she had dropped her son off at one of Harry's earlier birthday parties), Harry had barely spoken to her much less almost accusing her son of being a Death Eater in training. Harry bit his lip as he tried to solve this rather disastrous puzzle.

"Go on Potter. Say something," egged the young Malfoy. Harry's jaw flapped in the wind as he struggled to find the words to explicate his displeasure. Feeling defeated, Harry shut his mouth and settled for glaring resolutely at his Slytherin counter part.

"They've been targeted," Snape stated succinctly, "They have no one else."

Lily raised an eyebrow at this admission but said nothing. She took in the disheveled appearances of the usually proud Malfoys. While their robes might have still retained their expensive branding, the expression on their faces revealed that neither cared much for their fifty Galleon robes at the moment.

"I can't keep them here forever," Lily said strictly, "They can stay for the time being but they need to be moved."

Snape gave the barest of head nods to show he understood. He beckoned for the two Malfoys to approach him so he could speak to

them in private. Harry leaned over to his mother and looked questioningly at her.

"You do know who they are, right?"

"I know perfectly well, Harry. But I will not turn my back on people who have nowhere else to go so you better do your best to make this situation better or else the rest of your holidays will take an even sourer note," Lily snapped.

Harry bit his lip to refrain from snapping back at his mother and turned back to the Malfoys to keep a wary eye on Draco. Snape seemed to be giving them instructions, still retaining his usually passive face. Narcissa nodded once or twice before shaking the Potion Professor's hand vigorously. The blond haired woman approached Lily cautiously before procuring two wands from the inside fold of her robes. She offered them to Lily.

"These are our wands," she simply said, knowing the implication of surrendering them. Lily looked at them critically for a moment, weighing the options inside her head. Finally, she took them gently.

"I'll keep them safe," she promised. Narcissa nodded swiftly before she retreated back to Snape to bid farewell.

"Lily, can I have a word with you?" Snape requested. Lily stiffened but acquiesced nonetheless.

"Harry, show Mrs. Malfoy and her son to their room. They'll be staying in the guest room for now," Lily ordered. Harry grit his teeth and turned to climb the stairs.

"This way," he barely muttered.

The guest room was the furthest room down the left side of the hallway with the closest room being Harry's room. The master bedroom stood on the right side of the fork at the top of the staircase. Harry opened the door to the guest room and gestured for the Malfoys to step inside. Narcissa stepped inside the quaint room with only a hint of a nose scrunch. Malfoy did nothing to hide his distaste of the room. Feeling a bit indignant at their appraisal of his house, Harry reminded them.

"It's not much, but I'll make sure to have my Mom conjure another bed. Enjoy your stay," he finished as sarcastically as possible.

"Mr. Potter," Narcissa called out as Harry was beginning to leave the room, "Thank you for letting us stay here."

"You're welcome," Harry replied, slightly thrown off balance by the sudden comment. As quickly as she thanked him, Narcissa shut the door of the room in his face.

Neurotic. Everyone's gone certifiably insane.

The next few days passed without any major hubbub. Harry did his best to avoid Malfoy aside from the strangely mandatory dinners his mother seemed to request from them. To his surprise, Harry found that his mother and Narcissa seemed to be cordial enough to each other. He knew that Narcissa was slightly older than his mother, but the two seemed to have crossed path at their time in Hogwarts. Indeed, Harry was always puzzled when Malfoy somehow seemed to attend his birthday parties before he was old enough to attend Hogwarts. Harry had always assumed that it was because the Malfoys seemed to regard the Potter family as slightly respectable despite his mother's heritage. Appearance were everything for the Malfoys.

For most of the dinners, Harry was content to glare at Malfoy and viciously stab whatever food seemed to be on the table as a warning sign to the other boy. Malfoy gave his usual sneer and smirk but seemed to lack the bite that was so indicative of him. As the days went on, Malfoy spent more time in his room with his mother, where Harry usually did not hear as much as a peep.

On the fourth day of the break, Harry saw an unusual white owl racing across the sky to his house. This particular owl was unknown to Harry so he watched with mild amusement as it wobbled slightly in the air as it tried to make its way to his window. Harry opened the window in advance and saw a scroll attached to its leg. The owl gave him an affectionate nip to which Harry responded by allowing it a treat. He opened the scroll and was surprised to find it was from Cho.

Dear Harry,

I hope this owl finds you! He's a bit old and tends to wander aimlessly for a couple of days so I apologize in advance if he needs a bit of a rest. Things are so boring here now that everyone's gone. Marietta is driving me spare! Just the other day though, we got a pick up game going. It was way too easy though without you here. How are things at home? I'm really sorry about Ginny, that's so incredibly unfair. I know I'm rambling a bit but there's nothing else to do here! Anyways, I have to go and pretend to listen to Marietta for a little while.

Hope you write back,

Cho

Harry grinned as he folded the letter within its creases. This letter certainly had been a pleasant turn of events to a rather dour week. He did not quite think Cho would even bother writing him a letter during the winter. Harry gave himself a reminder to give Ginny a big, fat "I told you so" but immediately felt guilty when he remembered her current predicament.

"Who's that Harry? A girl?" came a voice from behind the young boy.

"It's actually a love note from Lockhart. You remember him right? Kind of a fairy, big smile," Harry smiled as he turned to face his father.

"You know I'd accept you no matter what," the older Potter said in mock seriousness. Laughing, Harry hugged him tightly around the middle before pulling back and taking in his rather disheveled form.

"Dad, are you okay?" Harry asked. The man in front of sported different cuts and bruises and rather dusty robes but still wore a bright smile on his face.

"Nothing that can't be fixed with a little visit to that snappy Pomfrey. How is she anyways? Still worried that the students are going to burn the castle to the ground?" James joked.

"Not so much as worried as she is prepared," Harry said wryly.

"Unchangeable that one. So the letter is from a girl, I presume," James waggled his eyebrows.

"Yeah," Harry drawled out with an added eye roll. James made to snatch the letter from his hand, but Harry was too quick on the draw.

"Harry, I have to check and make sure she's not a Death Eater," James said with a solemn face.

"Trust me, she's not," Harry laughed.

"Oh so you checked personally?"

"Dad, too much."

Laughing in response, James took a seat on Harry's bed, "Alright I'll back off for now. Let me guess though, Hermione?"

"No," Harry said with a curious expression, "Why would you think that?"

"Well you don't mention anyone besides Hermione and Ginny so I figured," James shrugged.

"No, someone else."

"Who?"

"Well I'm not telling you now you gossip monger."

"Guilty," James raised a hand. Harry chuckled again before settling into his desk chair and turning to face his father.

"Dad?" Harry said in a much more solemn tone.

"Yeah?"

"Why didn't you tell me about Sirius?" Harry finally asked the question he had been preparing since he saw the Azkaban escapee.

His father's face was perfectly schooled in maintaining a calm visage. Only a slight flicker of the eyes and an ever so subtle tightening of the lips gave away any indication of surprise. James took a moment to respond, clearly weighing the options inside his head.



"It's a bit complicated, Harry. No one knew that Sirius had given over Peter around that time," James said carefully.

"Then why didn't you listen to Sirius? He said that Pettigrew was the one that betrayed you," Harry asked, trying the best he could to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

"I only found that out recently as well, Harry. I will never forgive myself for not listening to Sirius. I let him sit in Azkaban all that time without so much as a single second to hear his appeal," James gulped.

"So we can trust Sirius right?"

"Yes we can," James sighed, "But I'm afraid that my treachery is something not easily forgiven. It's probably best if you don't mention me around him if you see him any time in the near future."

Harry nodded, his mind swirling with questions but also anger. How could his father let his best friend simply go to Azkaban without hearing his explanation? Harry was sure that his father was not the type of a man who would leave his friends out to dry. Then again, Harry could not really recall a time when his father was surrounded by his friends. The only times Harry saw him when he was younger were on birthdays and other important events. The rest of the time, Harry lived with his mother. Harry could not remember a time when James Potter was simply out with his friends. Was his father really so alone?

"I'm sorry I didn't really tell you about any of that, son. It's a part of my life I'm not very proud of," James continued.

"It's okay, I was just - curious," Harry said quietly.

"How are the Malfoys?" James asked, eager to redirect the conversation.

"They keep themselves mostly. Malfoy's still a git though. Draco I mean," Harry specified.

James chuckled and nodded, "Be careful, Harry. They might appear nice, but the Malfoys have and always will simply look to suit their interests. Their family comes first and nothing else."

"I know that," Harry rolled his eyes, "I figure the less I see them the better."

"Good show, Harry. Now your mum's granted me some time help your dueling. What say you we take it to the basement and you can teach me these advanced spells you've been apparently learning about," James sat up and clapped his hands together eagerly.

"Try to keep up," Harry quipped, earning a light shove in the back from James.

An hour later, Harry sat on his haunches, wiping sweat from his brow, after a particularly tough spell knocked him off his feet. James had caught him off guard by simply side stepping the majority of his curses. Frustrated, Harry resorted to firing a random amount of Stunners around James's feet, hoping to at least have his father antsy. His father simply performed an intricate leap and launched a spell that knocked Harry on his back.

"How do you do that?" Harry choked out as he tried to fill his lungs with air.

"You telegraph your moves too much. I know they teach you these intricate wand movements at school but most of the time they're unnecessary. I can practically spell out the jinx you're about to use even before you say it - here - practice trying to disarm with a tiny, tiny flick of your wrist," James showed just how little movement was needed.

Harry tried to replicate his father's effort but failed the first time. After several attempts, Harry finally managed to disarm his father with the daintiest of touches. Harry looked at his own wand, impressed by the feat. James laughed and nodded his head, affirming that Harry did indeed do a good job.

"That was wicked! Can I do that with other spells too..." Harry trailed off as he spied a figure lurking at the top of the stairs. James turned around to see a blond haired boy nervously looking between the two Potters.

"Draco, right? Come down and join us," James beckoned.

"I'll have to decline," he replied sourly, "I was just sent down to tell you that dinner is almost ready."

"Oh nonsense! Harry tells me that you're near top of the class in Defense."

Harry bowed his head shook it slowly.

"Flattered as I may be, I don't have a wand," Malfoy said.

"I have a spare here. It won't be as good as your own, but I gather you and Harry can put up a good show. Isn't that right Harry?"

Harry looked at his dad as if he had lost his mind.

"I suppose," Malfoy said, itching at the opportunity to hold a wand again.

"Here you go," James summoned a spare wand and tossed it to the other boy, "Step onto the stage."

Malfoy hoisted himself onto the makeshift platform and eyed his wand warily, clearly not too comfortable with it. Harry gave a look to James, clearly bewildered as to why he would set up this duel. James held his hands out, signaling that he had the situation under control.

"Now, same rules as in school Draco. I'll know if it's a dangerous spell, so no funny business. From either of you," James pointedly looked at both of the teenagers.

"Ready? Go."

Harry immediately attacked Draco by simply trying to blow up the ground from beneath him.

"Deprimo!"

Harry's aim was unfortunately off target and missed Malfoy by a couple of feet. Cursing, Harry immediately crouched in preparation

for one of Malfoy's jinxes. Predictably, Malfoy sent a harmless disarming spell sailing over Harry's head.

"Incarcerous!"

Harry could hear a dull thud from where he aimed his curse. Frowning, Harry thought that was incredibly too easy. As the particles of dust settled from the air, Harry could indeed see Malfoy struggling to escape from his imprisonment, his face stuck on the ground as he continued to wiggle.

"Really Malfoy? That was it?" it could have sounded like a taunt but to Harry, it was a genuine question. He did not expect the Slytherin to be beaten that easily. Harry's instinct was correct. Unbeknownst to Harry, Malfoy had muffled finite under his breath and rolled over to fire a jinx. Harry's glasses exploded in his face, the glass turning into sand. Harry was momentarily blinded as he ducked and rolled to evade incoming spell fire.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Harry dodged and rolled like a madman, unable to see where the jinxes were heading. Not knowing if he could somehow manage to ever see again, Harry spotted a blurry, body like figure and gave a tiny flick of his wand, hoping that the Expelliarmus would work. By some miracle, Harry felt a wand soar into his grasp and heard Malfoy gasp.

"Um, got it," Harry raised the other boy's wand in the air. After a moment, Harry heard his father recite a soft incantation and hand him the steel frame of his glasses. As Harry was putting on his glasses, he could see Malfoy stomping up the stairs back to the house. He turned to his father who was looking at him with a mixture of curiosity and disappointment.

"What?" Harry said irritably.

"Better lucky than good sometimes, eh?" James said with raised eyebrows, "You let your guard down, Harry. You can't do that. Don't stop until the duel is over."

"I know," Harry muttered, "I was just surprised. Malfoy's not a pushover."

"Well either way you still got lucky. How you managed to disarm Malfoy while not even looking at him was something," James clapped him on the back as a compliment.

"I know," Harry sheepishly admitted, "I could barely see anything."

James looked at him curiously before saying, "No - Harry - your back was turned to Malfoy when you disarmed him. You weren't even looking at him."

"Oh."

James continued to look at his son for a moment before fixing the collar on Harry's shirt.

"Come on. Lily will be furious that we're delaying dinner."

Harry nodded numbly as he headed up the stairs. Entering the kitchen, Harry could spot Lily trying to teach Narcissa how to skin the potatoes. Narcissa was trying to be a good sport about it all, but failed miserably as she continued to slice the potatoes in half or simply missing the whole potato itself. Lily chuckled at a particular bad slice and relieved her of her duties. Narcissa protested but looked quite relieved to sit down at the table with her son. Draco was looking out the window, his face displeased.

"Good of you to join us," Lily replied snippily.

"Just helping the boys here," James smiled at Narcissa courteously as he took his seat.

"Right," Lily huffed.

Dinner was a tame affair as the adults chit chatted about the old Hogwarts days without bringing up the subject of Lucius Malfoy or any other potential Death Eaters. Narcissa was polite enough to brush off any remarks Lily or James, but mostly Lily, had about the War. Once or twice, Harry thought that his father looked uncomfortable answering Narcissa's questions but the moments passed by quickly and Harry did not give it another thought. Dinner was finished and Harry excused himself to write his reply to Cho. Narcissa and Draco were also excused and retired to their room for

the night as well. Once they were gone, James broached a sensitive topic to Lily.

"Harry's found out about Sirius," he stated quietly, putting a sound charm around the kitchen to make sure no one was eavesdropping.

"It was only a matter of time," Lily stated matter-of-factly, her face in a deep frown.

"I told him that we just made a mistake regarding Sirius. I told him we didn't believe him at the time," James said in a monotone voice. Lily snorted a very unladylike snort in response.

"I'm sorry, Lily, I had to do what needed to be done."

"Sirius needed to go to Azkaban? Sirius needed to rot in a jail cell with Dementors? Sirius needed to stay there for thirteen years? Of course," Lily scoffed.

"I can't change too much. You have to understand," James pleaded quietly, sighing as he knew how this argument was going to end.

"I can't change too much," Lily mocked, "Here you are playing with everyone's lives and no one knows the better. I'm the one that has to deal with knowing. I'm the one that has to live with the fact that I purposely ignored one of my friends and sent him to that hell hole. I'm the one that has to live with the fact that Harry's real father is DEAD and he doesn't even know it!"

Lily jabbed her thumb to her chest as she repeated her claims, clearly distraught. James sighed frustrated, running a hand through his hair as he watched Lily pace the kitchen.

"I'm just doing what I can to protect Harry. To defeat Voldemort! Sirius would have found out about me too soon," James explained.

"Defeat Voldemort?" Lily asked incredulously, "Have you looked outside? The War's still going on! Poor Ginny is being sent to the front lines because Fudge is an ass that wants to make an example out of a fourteen-year old girl. I don't know what happened in your time, but it's terrible here."

James took a step towards her and towered over her, showing menace for the first time in a very long time, "You didn't see what I saw. You don't know how much I had to deal with just to get back here. You don't KNOW how this can all end. So don't talk about things you can't understand."

"Let go of me," Lily said through gritted teeth. James took a step back, blinking as he realized that he was harshly holding her wrist. He let go and watched as Lily wrung her out to reestablish the feeling in it.

"I don't know. Perhaps it would have been better if you didn't know either because you have no idea how this will all end either," Lily gestured around her.

"It will end differently."

"It better damn end differently," Lily threw her apron to the ground and stalked out of the kitchen.

Harry whistled as he headed down to high street to pick up some groceries. His mother would be out for the day running chores for the Order which left Harry to do most of the house work. After finishing his third letter to Cho (they had been trading letters for about a week now), Harry picked up the grocery list and headed out the door, informing Narcissa along the way. It was nearing dusk as Harry picked up a couple of apples and other assorted fruit. Glancing over his shoulder, Harry spotted a very pretty girl mulling over a choice of rashers.

"Go with the ones on the left. They cook better," Harry suggested out of the blue.

"Thanks," the girl smiled at him, "I don't think I've seen you around here before. I'm Amelia."

The girl stuck her hand out for a handshake. Harry dusted his hands off on his jeans and shook her hand, smiling all the while.

"Do you go to Uni around here?" she asked.

"Oh no, I go to a boarding school," Harry simply replied.

"Aw, that's too bad. You're a cutie," she flirted.

"Nothing wrong with a little youth in your life," Harry smartly responded.

The girl laughed, tossing her hair back, "You're a smart one aren't you. Give me a call in a couple of years, mystery boy."

She left with a wink but without a number. Harry chuckled to himself as he continued to pick up the rest of the list.

Why can't I speak to all girls like that? I freeze up in the moments where I'm needed and I'm Casanova at the shop. Great.

Sighing in defeat, Harry picked up the last of his groceries and paid the proper amount. Armed with two brown bags of necessary food, Harry continued to whistle a jaunty tune as he rounded the bend to Godric's Hollow. The sun was settling in the horizon and Harry took a moment to admire the view. It was not every day one could be treated to such an open expanse of land. As Harry approached his house however, he immediately noticed something was afoot. The magic surrounding the house was altered, Harry could feel that much. Setting the bags down in the garden, Harry quietly tip toed to a window and peeked inside.

That's not good.

Three cloaked men surrounded Draco in the kitchen. The blond haired boy was on his knees with his hands bound around his back. To Harry's horror, he spotted Narcissa splayed across the kitchen table. Her wrists and ankles were bound to each corner and there were already many cuts and bruises on her body. Her clothes were gruesomely torn off in several places and Harry shuddered to think what they had done to her. Currently, the tallest Death Eater seemed to be questioning Draco.

Shit. Shit. Shit. What do I do? Where's mother? How'd they get here? What happened to the wards around the house?

The questions raced through Harry's mind in a flash. The Potters had declined taking on another Secret-Keeper after their previous fiasco and elected to erect a series of highly advanced wards around Godric's Hollow to prevent it from being discovered and



subsequently attacked. Harry had no way to locate his mother as his owl was currently delivering a letter to Cho and he had no idea if his shimmering Patronus could even find his mother.

Peeking back inside, Harry almost chucked his lunch when he saw what they were doing to Draco's mother. One of the Death Eaters severed her leg and Harry could see the blood immediately spurt from the veins and arteries. Narcissa screamed in agony, no doubt silenced by some charm or the other. After a couple of seconds of what had to be excruciating pain, the Death Eater muttered something, waving his wand to and fro, and the leg suddenly reattached itself. The Death Eater then severed the leg and repeated this process. Harry knew that he had to act quickly or else Draco's mother would quickly die from blood loss. He hated Malfoy but there was no way he was going to let this happen.

Okay. Best possible scenario? Dumbledore shows up and I run away.

Most plausible scenario?

I can't take on all three of them at one time. Suicidal.

I can't even take one of them straight on. I have to ambush them but also extract Malfoy and his mother. How am I going to do that? Are there any spells that can hold them off for that long? Would Malfoy be able to fight back if I found his wand? Their wands; I know where they are! Do I get them first or do I try to free them and then get their wands?

Harry's mind was quickly melting into mush as he tried to process the necessary information needed to overcome this abominable situation. He carefully poked his head around the corner to see what was happening. To Harry's horror, one of the Death Eaters had removed his robes and shirt to reveal a sickly tattooed body. On his right shoulder was a giant serpent filled with several other miniature serpents surrounding it. The rest of his back was also tattooed in similar though Harry could not make out they were. His hips were thrusting in between Narcissa's legs and left little to no imagination of what they were doing to her. Harry could see Malfoy desperately pleading, tears in his normally cool eyes, as he fought his captors but the other two Death Eaters simply laughed at him.

DO SOMETHING. I have to look. I have to assess the situation.

Harry forced himself to look inside the kitchen, desperately trying to block out the image of the tattooed Death Eater. His eyes quickly scanned the area. Mr. Tattoo was at the kitchen table. The other two Death Eaters were standing off to the side, blocking the main hallway. The stove and the rest of the kitchen were separate by a counter that jutted out from the wall. There was no way Harry could curse one of the Death Eaters without the other ones doing something to one of the Malfoys. He needed a way to take them all out at one time. Collapsing the roof or ground was impossible since Narcissa or Draco would surely be hurt in the resulting rubble.

Please! Let there be something!

There was a flash from the back of the kitchen near the counter and Harry saw his silver lining. A set of knives were perched on the counter, no doubt left there from the skinning of the potatoes a couple nights earlier. His mother was usually very prompt in cleaning the kitchen but had seemed distracted for the past couple of days. Harry thanked the fates for what ever had distracted her and formulated the plan in his head. The task would be difficult, no doubt, but if Harry could pull it off, he would be able to save everyone.

In order to free Draco, Harry would need to summon the knife edges towards himself and in the process, slice the Death Eaters apart. There was little room for error since Draco was simply kneeling in front of them, begging for his mother's life. Both of the Death Eaters were of average height and Malfoy on his knees was essentially half their height. That gave Harry approximately two and a half feet to hit the two Death Eaters. If all things went according to plan, Harry could summon the knives, free Malfoy, and hit the last Death Eater while he was - distracted.

Please hold on.

Harry pleaded, mostly for Malfoy's mother. Positioning himself between where he knew where the knives were and the approximate area of the Death Eaters, Harry concentrated as hard as he could on controlling the knives in flight.

"Accio knives!"

Harry could not hear if anything had struck its target due to the Silencing charm around the house and immediately bolted inside. He had but a split second to see that all three bodies were collapsed on the ground, blood pooling around them. In the other half of the split second, Harry fired the strongest Stupefy he could to the large tattooed man. Mr. Tattoo was clearly caught off guard as he was blasted into the adjacent wall. Mr. Tattoo moaned on the ground, clearly not knocked out.

"Stupefy!"

The next Stunner seemed to knock Mr. Tattoo out, but Harry could not dwell nor check if that fact was true. He immediately rushed over to the blood-covered Draco and hoped that he had not killed the boy.

"Malfoy! Malfoy!" he yelled as he extracted his body from the pile. Harry was relieved to find Malfoy struggling to release himself from his bonds.

"Hold still! Finite!" Harry pointed his wand at the bonds behind his back and released the boy. Draco immediately went to his mother while Harry rushed up the stairs to retrieve their wands. As he hopped down the stairs to give the Malfoys their wands back, Harry was shocked to see Malfoy crying over his mother's body.

"Malfoy?" Harry asked questioningly as he cautiously approached the boy.

Narcissa Malfoy was a gruesome sight to behold. Gallons of blood surrounded her body and slowly dripped off the table, the sticky substance creating a coat that could have resembled a dining room table cloth from very far away. Her clothes were ripped in all places and Harry had to look away out of decency.

"She's dead," whispered Draco, his head buried on her stomach. His eyes were glazed over, clearly in shock.

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat as he turned away from the scene, tucking their wands into his robes. There was little time for Harry to dwell over the evening's occurrences as he spotted three more figures racing to his house from across the large expanse of land. Grabbing a spare of binoculars his mother had used for bird

watching, Harry lifted them to his eyes and saw the tell tale masks of Death Eaters.

"Malfoy! Malfoy! We need to go, there's more Death Eaters coming!" Harry shook the boy's shoulder, hoping to break him out of his stupor. Malfoy barely moved, only muttering, "I can't leave her. Only thing left..."

"Malfoy, I'm sorry," Harry pleaded in earnest, "We have to go take my broom and get out of here!"

The Death Eaters had already landed on the road and were going to cross the garden at any moment. Harry had no choice but to forcibly yank Malfoy's arm and pull him to his feet. Taking the boy by his shoulders, Harry squared himself and looked straight into Malfoy's eyes.

"I am very sorry, Malfoy. We need to leave," Harry begged. Malfoy numbly nodded, clearly not understanding the importance of Harry's statement. Harry did not have time to sort out all of Malfoy's problems. He quickly gave Malfoy one of the Death Eater's wands and signaled for him to come up the stairs.

"Malfoy! Where are you going?"

Malfoy had walked into the corner where Mr. Tattoo lay in a crumpled heap. The Death Eaters surely were coming through the door at any moment. Harry watched as Malfoy stood over the unconscious body of the man for a moment before raising his wand.

"Petrificus Totalus. Confrigo."

Harry watched in terror as Mr. Tattoo was engulfed in flames, his body unable to move to prevent himself from being burnt alive. At the same moment, the doorknob turned and Harry reacted instinctively.

"Reducto!"

The door burst into splinters and sent the Death Eaters outside reeling. Harry screamed for Malfoy and the boy finally snapped out of it and broke into a run up the stairs. A series of spells singed Harry's shirt as he turned the corner to his bedroom. Harry retreated

into his bedroom and locked the door with a temporary sticking charm. It would last approximately three seconds under the weight of the Death Eaters. Quickly using a packing charm for his most important belongings, Harry scrambled around the room to retrieve his Firebolt. He hopped on to the broom and signaled for Malfoy to do the same. Malfoy hesitantly hopped onto the back and Harry kicked off through his window just as his door exploded.

"Hold on Malfoy!"

Harry immediately went into a series of barrel rolls to avoid the deadly green curses being sent in his direction. Up and up he went as he tried to evade the curses. In one last moment of inspiration, Harry sent a desperately aimed Reducto at the Death Eater's brooms. Harry watched in grim satisfaction as the brooms exploded on the ground. Once he was high enough to assume he was out of immediate harm, Harry turned his broom around to see if any of the Death Eaters were following him. There were no other bodies in the sky and Harry let out a sigh of relief.

BOOM.

Harry cried in dismay as he watched Godric's Hollow erupt from the inside, the flames quickly engulfing his home. The fire licked the night sky as if the devil's tongue was at work itself. There were tears running down Harry's cheeks as he took sight of his beloved home being razed to the ground. Knowing it was only a matter of time before more Death Eater reinforcements arrived, Harry steeled himself and quickly for the only destination he knew: The Burrow.

Harry touched down a couple hundred yards outside the Burrow. The flight to Ottery St. Catchpole was not long from what used to be Godric's Hollow. Both places were located in the West Country and Harry had made the trip on broomstick before with his father. However, Harry had never flown at night without any concealment charms and Death Eaters potentially scouting his location. The adrenaline had finally worn off by now as Harry holstered his bag of belongings and willed himself to stop shaking. Malfoy had been deathly silent the whole trip, no doubt in shock from the events at Harry's former home. Harry, for his part, was content with the status quo while they were flying but needed Malfoy to listen to him for just a second.

"Malfoy, can you see the Burrow?" asked Harry, unsure whether or not the access granted to him would allow Malfoy to see the dilapidated house of the Weasleys. Malfoy nodded, his face still eerily passive.

"Okay good, stay here for a second and don't go anywhere," Harry warned him. Malfoy did not respond so Harry took that as a yes.

Sighing, Harry shouldered his bag and felt a sharp poke at his side. Moving the bag just a bit, Harry checked his robes and found two wands on the inside pocket. He looked back at Malfoy and decided that perhaps it was not the best idea to give the boy a wand for now. Weaving his way through the tumble and weeds, Harry carefully approached the front door of the Burrow. As soon as he was within thirty feet of the structure, a voice immediately called out to him.

"Stop!" came the disembodied voice.

Harry looked around to see Fred Weasley approaching him with his wand drawn. His face looked quite more serious than Harry had ever seen, slightly unnerving him. Harry put down the bag and raised his hands in the air to show he was no threat.

"Fred! It's me, Harry Potter!"

Fred narrowed his eyes at the other boy for a moment as he stepped closer. Tilting his head as if he did not quite believe him, Fred posed a question, "Quidditch versus Slytherin this season. What'd I say when Malfoy winked at you?"

"You thought that if you didn't know any better, Malfoy had taken a liking to me," Harry easily replied.

Fred visibly exhaled and stowed his wand, "Gone and almost gave me a shock, Potter. Mind telling me why you showed up at our door at this time of night without a proper greeting?"

"My house," Harry looked down at his feet, "It was attacked."

Fred's joking manner immediately evaporated as he started to usher Harry into the Burrow. Harry started forward with a step but immediately halted. Fred turned around to look at him questioningly. Biting his lip, Harry looked back into the darkness with a small amount of trepidation.

"Fred," Harry, "There's something you should know. Malfoy - they - I don't - they killed his mother. They were staying with us."

Fred looked grim, the hard lines on his face tightening, "I can't wish that even on him. I assume he's with you?"

Harry nodded, "He's back there, I didn't know whether to bring him or not, but I don't have a choice in the matter anymore."

"Right," Fred agreed, "Well, bring him on up. He'll be able to see the house if you're with him."

Harry nodded and walked back to retrieve Malfoy. Harry found Malfoy sitting cross legged and intently staring at the waning moon. His face still remained almost peacefully stoic as if it were just another evening. Harry cleared his throat in an attempt to catch his attention but failed. Harry coughed a bit louder, not knowing what words he could say to console the boy. He was about to heave out a lung when Malfoy suddenly stood.

"Um, follow me," Harry said confusedly. Harry started walking, checking back once to see that Malfoy was indeed following.

As Fred's outline reappeared, Harry threw a thumbs up to indicate that Malfoy was following him. Fred nodded and opened the door to the Burrow to let the two teenagers inside. Fred gave a courteous head nod to the Slytherin boy to which the boy did not repay.

"No one's actually here right now. I know your mother's been in and out of Headquarters which is where everyone's been," Fred explained as he approached their fire place.

Fred stopped just before he threw the Floo Powder. He looked up at Malfoy, then back to Harry. Harry simply shrugged, unable to find a suitable reaction to Malfoy's calm demeanor. Fred grinded his jaw as he visibly sought for something to say to provoke a reaction from the boy. He then sighed as if conceding defeat before pulling out a piece of parchment.

"Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place?" Harry read it aloud as question before handing it to Malfoy. Malfoy gave it a quick glance before handing it back.

"Headquarters," Fred simply replied before burning the parchment, "Yell it out loud and clear."

Fred handed Harry the bag of Floo Powder first. Taking just a pinch, Harry yelled as ordered and felt the familiar twirling sensation of traveling through the Floo. Harry sucked in a bit of ash as he tumbled out of the fireplace into a warm, hearth rug. Harry dusted his glasses off before realizing he was not alone.

"Harry?" Ron and Neville asked. The pair were situated in opposite high back chairs, a chess board between them.

"Hullo," Harry replied tiredly.

Harry had just enough time to neatly sidestep a rolling Malfoy. Neville and Ron immediately leapt to their feet, their wands raised. Panicking, Harry situated himself in front of Malfoy with his arms splayed out.

"Wait, wait, wait! It's alright, he's with me," Harry explained.

"He's with you?" Ron asked incredulously.

"No," Harry winced, "I mean - he's alright - I mean - it's a long story."

Fred stepped out of the fireplace last, relieving Harry of any duty he had to protect Malfoy. Not saying a word, Fred immediately made to leave the room, indicating that Harry and Malfoy should follow.



Neville and Ron looked at each other before following the unlikely trio.

"Fred, what's going on? What's Malfoy doing here?" Ron whispered the second question even though Malfoy was clearly in earshot.

"Harry's house has been attacked. Malfoy was with them," Fred gave the honest but edited version of the story.

"Is everyone alright?" Neville asked in concern.

"The house was burned to the ground but everyone got out - um - uh," Harry stuttered as he realized that everyone did not leave unscathed.

"Everyone what?" Ron pressed. Neville fortunately caught the drift in time and elbowed the other boy lightly.

"What?" Ron angrily asked.

"Ron, shut up," Fred commanded without any trace of witticism. Ron glared angrily at his older brother but recognized the tone enough to not say any more.

Malfoy had not so much as blinked during this entire exchange. Harry was beginning to fear that the boy did not leave Godric's Hollow without a spell on him. Before he could voice his thoughts, however, they reached the kitchen of the house. Harry sucked in his breath as he spotted Sirius Black and Remus Lupin sitting at the table.

"Fred? What's going on?" Sirius stood and eyed the two extra boys warily.

Fred leaned over and whispered something in the older man's ears, causing him to raise his eyebrows. Fred repeated the procedure with Lupin as Sirius approached the four teenagers. Sirius examined the state of Harry and Malfoy with a slow shake of his head.

"Are you alright?" the question was directed to both of them but only Harry responded, "I'm fine."

Sirius stared at Malfoy as the boy did not respond. Malfoy raised his eyes to stare back evenly as a contest started to form between the two. Eventually, Sirius blinked in startled surprise. Malfoy immediately returned to ducking his head as soon as eye contact was broken.

"Sirius, what's going on?" Neville asked a bit impatiently.

"Voldemort seems to have planned a series of attacks for tonight. He also attacked the Granger residence," Sirius confessed.

"WHAT?" three voices yelled simultaneously.

"Is she alright -"

"What happened -"

"Why aren't you -"

Sirius raised a hand to silence the battling voices of the concerned part of the group. Looking back to find Fred and Remus still engrossed in conversation, Sirius leaned forward and spoke.

"Don't worry, she's okay. She's being sent here while her parents are being sent to Australia for their safety. She should be here any minute."

Harry, Neville, and Ron looked at each other nervously, none of them comfortable with an attack on their favorite bushy haired girl. Fred and Lupin signaled for the rest of the group to join them at the kitchen table. They all stepped forward, Malfoy trailing slightly behind and declining to take a seat. He instead opted to stare out the window, looking at the empty street with unnerving calm. Neville and Ron turned to look at Harry in curiosity. Harry could only shake his head as if to say, "Don't bother asking."

"Why would Voldemort attack Malfoy and Hermione?" Ron wondered aloud.

"They didn't come for me," Malfoy droned without turning around.

"Mr. Malfoy, excuse me?" said Lupin.

"They didn't come for me," Malfoy repeated.

"I think," Sirius started slowly, "What young Mr. Malfoy means is that they came for Harry."

Harry's eyebrows disappeared beneath his hairline at this revelation. He was sure that the Death Eaters had come to take back Malfoy. After all, Professor Snape had said that the two were targets. It had never occurred to Harry that he might have been a possible target.

"I don't understand. Me?" Harry questioned.

"It stands to reason that Voldemort would attack the classmates of Neville," Sirius stated bluntly.

Neville immediately took a sharp intake of breathe while Ron shifted uncomfortably. Lupin gave Sirius a disappointed shake of his head. Harry looked guiltily at Neville while Malfoy did not budge from his spot.

"I think that's enough for now Sirius," Lupin's voice had a slightly admonishing tone to it.

"Professor," Neville started impatiently, "But why Harry and Hermione? Why not the Burrow - no offense you guys."

"None taken," the Weasley brothers responded in unison.

"It might have something to do with -"

"Sirius, that's enough," Lupin stated harshly, "Harry. Malfoy. Both of you will need to give as best of a recap of the events that transpired when some people get back."

"But Professor!" Neville started to protest before Lupin cut him off with a raising of his hand.

"First, how many times must I tell you to call me Remus? Second, this isn't the best time for this. The Order's been called into an emergency meeting so we need to clear out of this kitchen right away."

Neville sighed in frustration while Sirius sat back in his chair, crossing his arms petulantly. Harry stood up, glad to be away from the tension. There was something unsettling in the way Sirius looked at him. It was as if the man was trying to find something within him that Harry did not know was even there. Excusing himself, Harry asked for the bathroom and immediately bolted the kitchen. Taking the staircase two steps at a time to the second floor, Harry wrenched open the bathroom door and immediately emptied the contents of his stomach.

Slamming the door shut, Harry wavered in place as he placed his hands on either side of the sink. Harry struggled to turn the faucet as the shakes in his hands reappeared. He splashed water in his face as he fought against the feeling of hyperventilation. Bile rose to his throat yet again as he quickly bent at the waist to deposit another amount into the toilet.

I just killed a man.

The thought shook Harry so hard that he had to splash his face again as if he were willing himself to forget. But Harry could not forget. Perhaps he was lucky in that he did not have to see the immediate visual effects of killing a man with a knife. Still, the knowledge that he killed someone - no - two people, shocked Harry.

I did it to defend the Malfoys.

Harry reasoned with himself, trying to make sense of this spiraling situation. He slapped his face a couple of times, letting out a moan as he fought the growing voice inside his head. Harry clawed at his hair as he pleaded for the voice to leave.

I killed someone.

"Go away. Go away. Go away," Harry muttered as he swayed on his feet.

Harry lied down in precaution as he clutched his head, his overwhelmingly guilty conscious tearing his mind. The last thing Harry remembered was a startled yell from the floor below as he slipped into unconsciousness.

The first thing Harry noticed was that he was no longer on the cold floor of the bathroom. The warmth of the fire fell over him as Harry realized he was situated on a couch of sorts near the fireplace. As he oriented himself with his surroundings, two blurry objects walked into view.

"Oh, you're awake!" Hermione said, "Here, your glasses."

"Thanks," Harry said as he sat up and put on his glasses.

"Had us worried there for a second," Ginny said.

"What? Why?"

"Well usually when you're passed out on the floor, people start to worry," Ginny said with a purposely condescending tone.

"What she meant," Hermione gave Ginny a patronizing look, "was that we were worried something happened to you."

"I know that," Ginny snapped.

"I'm fine," Harry said with a bewildered look as his eyes flitted back and forth between the two, "The day just caught up to me was all."

"Are you alright?" Harry suddenly asked in concern, "I - we - heard about the attacks."

"I'm completely safe," Hermione waved dismissively, "Tonks got me out of there way before the Death Eaters even arrived. I think we managed to capture one or two of them as well."

"Tonks?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Wotcher," chirped a voice from behind Harry. Harry turned around to see a woman in Auror robes with ostentatiously purple hair.

"We've met, but we haven't, but we have and you just didn't know it," Tonks said, her hair changing every time she adjusted her statement.

"Right..." Harry trailed off.

Mental.

"She's an Auror that works with the Order," Hermione explained.

"Gotcha."

"Now, I'm going to have to pull you away from the fine company of these young ladies for a moment," Tonks winked, "We need to get a recount of what happened at the Hollow."

"We'll be in our rooms upstairs afterwards, Harry," Hermione informed him.

"Thanks."

Tonks led him to the kitchen, chit chatting idly about Hogwarts all the way. Harry found her to be odd but rather amusing in a sort of off-kilter manner. Not for the first time, Harry wondered whether he was the only one with any sanity left in the wizarding world. As he entered the kitchen, Malfoy was being led out, Sirius pushing him by the shoulder.

"What's going to happen to him?" Harry inquired of Malfoy.

"Sirius is just showing him his room."

"They're not going to detain him or anything like that?"

"Do you think they should?" Tonks rounded on him with a non-pulsed look.

"Er, no."

"He'll be a little away from the others for obvious reasons, but I think it's safe to say we aren't worried about him giving us away."

Tonks led him down to a solitary chair under a single light. It strangely reminded Harry of those odd mobster Muggle films where the hostage usually received a beating by various objects. Though Harry thought this scenario would not play out as such, he squirmed in his seat nonetheless.

"Hey Harry," Lupin smiled kindly at him.

"We're just going to take this from the top. Take as long as you can."

Harry started to recount the exact events of the Hollow, beginning with his trip to the store. He had to stop a couple of times when asked to describe the exact details of Narcissa's torture. Lupin granted him considerable time to gather himself before pushing forwards. All the while, a quill was transcribing the events onto a parchment while Harry talked.

Harry paused as he arrived at the part of the story where he used the Summoning charms to down the Death Eaters. Seeing as how there was no using in lying, Harry haltingly described what he did to free Malfoy. Lupin did not blink an eye during the retelling of the story. As he wrapped up the interrogation, Harry noted that Sirius had been standing against one of the kitchen counters the whole time, his arms coolly crossed as he surveyed the boy.

"Thank you, Harry. You did the best you could in that situation. Your mother would be very proud of you," Lupin said as he wrapped up the parchment.

"My mother!" Harry gasped, feeling guilty he had forgotten all about her in the rush, "Is she okay? Where is she?"

"She's finishing something right now and will be informed as soon as she's finished. No doubt she'll be right over here soon," Lupin informed him.

As if on cue, there was a loud ruckus as the front door opened and shut. Two sets of loud footsteps could be heard racing through the entrance and into the kitchen. Hurtling around the corner was a disheveled Lily Potter and a slightly dirty James Potter. Lily immediately flung herself at her soon as she soothed over the boy's hair with her hands.

"You're alright, you're alright," she murmured into his hair.

Harry was slightly mollified at his mother's actions but held her tight nonetheless. He knew how she worried constantly about him. It was her worrying when he was younger that forced him to stay at home with her most of the times. Lily seemed to shelter Harry more than a normal mother would at these times.

"I'm fine, Mum. I got okay, the house though..." Harry petered off sadly.

"We'll just get another one, I'm just glad you're okay," Lily framed his face with her hands, the glistening of tears marking her eyes.

Unbeknownst to the involved mother and son, Sirius and James had been caught in a sort of stand off. James was looking hesitantly at Harry, his posture stiff, while Sirius had pushed off the counter, his face etched with fury. Lupin's eyes roved across the pair, his wand clutched tightly at his side. Lily stood and immediately noticed the tension in the room. She took a warning step between the two men, eyeing them warily. James glanced over at Sirius one more time before stepping towards Harry and holding him firmly on the shoulder.

"Harry, are you okay? Nothing hurt?" James asked with a waver in his voice.

"I'm fine," Harry said, distracted by the animosity between Sirius and his father.

"I'm fine too, James," Sirius drew out his name sarcastically.

"I'm glad," was the succinct reply.

"Completely fine. No scars, no marks in my life," Sirius started to make his way around the table to where James stood, unimpeded by either Lupin or Lily.

"Sirius -" James started.

"What? What? What?" Sirius cut him off, repeating his question quickly.

"Is that a hint of an apology in your voice? Is that an apology tinged with regret?" Sirius asked, mostly to himself.

"Sirius, please don't do this right now," James pleaded, his hand clutching Harry's shoulder tightly as he moved the boy behind him.

"Oh the boy has a right to know as well, doesn't he? He is your - son - isn't he?" Sirius sneered.



Lily and Lupin both had their wands out now but let the interaction go on. Sirius was moving closer and closer as if a beast were stalking its prey. James simply stood his ground, making sure to keep himself between Harry and Sirius.

"Harry doesn't quite know what his father has done," Sirius said in a sing song tone.

"He knows. I've told him."

"Oh, so NOW you tell him?" Sirius mocked.

"NOW you tell him how you sent your best mate off to Azkaban without so much as a sparing glance. NOW you tell him that you're sorry for it," Sirius nodded his head, now face to face with James.

"I am more sorry than you could ever think," James whispered softly, true sadness etching his face.

"You are not worth of being his father, James. You are not even worthy of being a man. The only reason I don't wipe you clean off this Earth is the fact that there would be others hurt by your departure. It's the reason I'm the better man than you will ever even hope of being," Sirius incanted in a devilish whisper, his face mere centimeters away.

James did not reply, only holding the gaze of the formerly imprisoned man. After a moment, Sirius stepped away and fled the kitchen. Lily and Lupin let out a breath, relieved the encounter had not escalated any further.

"Perhaps its best if you don't stay here right now," Lupin said to James without a hint of remorse.

"But -" Harry protested.

"No. He's right, Harry," James replied as he turned around and faced the boy.

"It would be better for everyone if I wasn't right here right now. I promise to stop by to talk to you. It would just be beneficial if we weren't in the same house," James said, wincing as he said, "We."

"I don't think you're a bad father," Harry blurted out.

James nodded and gulped before softly replying, "Thank you Harry. That means a lot to me."

James gave him one more hug before departing Grimmauld. Lily collected her son in another hug before telling to go upstairs with the others so she could converse with Lupin privately about the events at the Hollow. Nodding and giving his mother's hand a squeeze, Harry trudged up the staircase to where Hermione had said they would be staying. Harry spotted a glowing light underneath one of the doors and knocked.

"Come in!" came the muffled voice from within.

Harry entered to find that the whole crew were in some sort of library area. Neville and Ron were standing around a desk while Ginny and Hermione sat in separate chairs, pouring over newspapers. Malfoy sat in a separate chair away from the group.

"Good, you're back," Hermione said breathlessly, making an effort to stand up and give him a hug. Harry spotted Neville and Ron both giving him dark looks over her shoulder.

"Uh thanks," Harry reluctantly let go of her.

"Is everything alright then?" she asked him.

"Yeah, I told them what happened and that was it."

"Do you want to tell us what happened?" Ron asked eagerly.

"Well," Harry threw a hesitant look at Malfoy, "I don't know if I can. It's taken a lot out of me already to say it."

The group looked slightly disappointed, Neville and Ron especially so, at Harry's confession. Ron turned to eye Malfoy with suspicion and started to walk towards the silent boy.

"Hey Malfoy? Want to tell us what happened with your Death Eater friends?" Ron beckoned him towards the table.

Malfoy only spared an empty glance towards Ron before turning away again. Ron looked angered by Malfoy's dismissal. Harry suddenly took a step towards Malfoy, feeling oddly protective of the motherless boy.

Please don't do this Ron.

Ron was not to be deterred by Malfoy's dismissal, "I bet you were in on the act weren't you?"

This particular comment caught Malfoy's attention as the blond turned his head towards the freckled boy. The anxiety in the air was palpable as the rest of the Gryffindors stood frozen by the exchange.

"Come on Malfoy, just tell us," Ron complained.

"Ron, stop," Harry asked more than he commanded.

"You know who he is Harry! Don't tell me you're standing up for this git," Ron accused.

"I don't care. I was there and he had nothing to do with it."

"You don't know that, it could have been planned for all you know. Him and his Death Eater parents."

Harry grabbed Ron by the collar of his robes and slammed the boy against a bookshelf. Ron was a couple inches taller than Harry, but Harry had surprised the boy. Ron looked at Harry as if he had lost his mind.

"I don't give a fuck who he is," Harry whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, "His mother died, so give him a fucking break."

Harry released Ron and stepped back, his hands shaking once again. Harry sat down shakily on an empty ottoman, while Ron adjusted his robes, his eyes unsurely going back and forth between Malfoy and Harry. Neville suddenly spoke after the heated exchange.

"He's right," Neville nodded to Harry, "If they allowed him in here, I reckon he's safe to stay."

Malfoy gave no indication that he cared whether he was allowed to stay at Grimmauld. He simply kept his eyes on the waning moon through the window. Ginny gave a small squeak, letting out a nervous sound that was a mix between a laugh and a cry.

"Sorry," she pleaded, "It's just so crazy now."

She turned and fled the room without another word.

"She does that a lot now," Ron commented.

"Ron, shut it. She has a lot to deal with," Hermione snapped.

"I know that," Ron looked furious at the accusation that he did not care about his sister, "I'm just saying."

"Why don't we all just take a step back," Neville recommended.

"Easy for you to say, Mr. I-get-letters-from-Cho-Chang-everyday," Ron shook his head back and forth as he emphasized Neville's title. Hermione said nothing but did not look pleased at Neville's interaction as well.

"Cho Chang's been writing to you?" Harry asked, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Yes, it's not a big deal," Neville glared at Ron.

"Excuse me," Harry said as he left the room, his face stonily angry but hidden from the view of the Trio.

"Great, now Harry gets to stomp off sulkily too! Who's next? You, Hermione?"

Hermione promptly sent a silencing charm in Ron's direction.

Harry spent the next couple of days lounging about Grimmauld Place. There was really nothing to do as the group were forbidden to leave the place for fear of their safety. Harry spent most of this time with Hermione and Ginny as they did homework and talked about various subjects. He avoided Ron and Neville for the most part; Ron because he was grouching bellyacher and Neville because of Cho. Harry inferred that Neville did not know Cho had also sent Harry

letters as well and Harry preferred to keep it that way for now. Malfoy kept to himself and was usually seen staring serenely into the sky.

"Bah humbug. This is tiresome," Harry leaned back and sighed exaggeratedly.

"I wonder what the others are doing?" Ginny reasoned, not doing any homework on account of her call up.

"Ron's probably complaining there's nothing to do and Neville's probably writing another letter to Cho," Hermione viciously stabbed her quill into the parchment.

"Sound a little more jealous," Ginny commented off handedly.

"I'm not jealous," Hermione said monotonously, this argument repeating itself again.

"You're right. What's there to possibly be jealous of?" Ginny eyed Harry this time. Harry steadfastly refused to meet her stare.

"Absolutely nothing," was Hermione's reply.

"Who are you trying to convince? Me or you?" Ginny pressed as she filed her nails.

"No one. There is no convincing to be made," Hermione tried to worm her way out of the line of questioning.

"So you don't care at all?"

"Nope."

Ginny paused, eyeing one particular nail thoughtfully. She spared a glance to Harry before grinning wickedly.

"So you wouldn't care if Harry went out with her?"

"No. I would be -" Hermione spared Harry a sidelong glance, "- happy for him."

"You would?" asked Harry.

"Yes," she started hesitantly, "I would also remind you to be careful around her because I don't trust her and her hair can be hideous sometimes."

"Her hair isn't hideous, yours could do with some work if you allowed me," Ginny said.

"I like Hermione's hair," Harry complimented.

"Thank you!" Hermione threw her quill into the air in frustration, "We don't all have to be blessed with Cho's luxurious locks!"

"First, shut up Harry, you know nothing about hair. Second, so if you don't care about her hair, why'd you mention it?" Ginny continued her roundabout argument.

"Because I hate YOU," Hermione snapped her quill.

"That's not a very logical argument," Ginny said airily. Harry gave her a wary glance, indicating she should really stop her teasing of Hermione. Ginny simply shrugged back.

Ginny was spared a venomous retort from Hermione as Neville and Ron walked into the drawing room. Ron yawned exaggeratedly and plopped down next to Hermione to look at her homework.

"Blimey, can you nerds do anything else?" asked Ron.

"No we can't. Not all of us are talented in the art of bemoaning our every movement," Hermione snapped.

"It's a gift."

"Idiot."

"Stop," Neville said warily.

"What are you lot so snappy about?" came the voice of Molly Weasley as she entered the drawing room with Lupin, Tonks, and Dumbledore in tow.

"Ron's complaining there's nothing to do. Neville's complaining about Ron complaining there's nothing to do. Hermione's complaining that Ron's complaining there's nothing to do. Harry seems to be fixated on the end of his quill," Ginny said in summary. Harry stopped chewing on his quill.

CRASH.

The five teenagers immediately whipped out their wands with Ron firing a stray Stunner in the direction of the noise. Malfoy looked nonplused as he watched the Stunner sail harmlessly over his head. He pointed to an antique plate that was now shattered on the ground.

"Fell," Malfoy spoke a single word.

"Ron!" Hermione yelped.

"What? I was being defensive."

"Can both of you just shut it," said Neville.

"I'd like for all three of you to shut it but that's just me," shrugged Ginny.

"All of you STOP!" came the authoritative voice of Mrs. Weasley, "This bickering is outrageous."

"We've been holed up here too long Mum! I think I'm starting to develop that Muggle thing. What's it called? Log sickness?"

"Cabin Fever," Hermione dully replied.

"Whatever."

Molly started to huff and puff, but Dumbledore interrupted her, "I think Mr. Weasley is correct."

"Doubtful," muttered Ginny. Harry and Hermione both snorted and tried to cover it up as a cough.

"They aren't meant to be locked up in this house," Dumbledore reasoned, "Perhaps it would to everyone's benefit that they take a break while we have our meeting tonight."

Lupin looked at him thoughtfully while Mrs. Weasley seemed slightly disconcerted with the kids leaving the house.

"Where would they go? Nowhere is safe here," Mrs. Weasley immediately interjected.

"Correct, Molly. Fortunately, my friends overseas owe me a favor."

"Special International Portkey," Dumbledore brandished a small American flag out of his robes.

"America?" Lupin and Mrs. Weasley asked incredulously.

"America!" cheered Ginny and Ron.

"But - but - unsupervised," Mrs. Weasley stuttered.

"I'd be glad to go along," Tonks volunteered.

"It's settled then!" Dumbledore clapped his wands before Mrs. Weasley could get another word in, "The Portkey lasts six hours. I think that's a sufficient amount of time."

"Golden," whispered Ron.

"Mr. Malfoy must agree to attend as well," Dumbledore nodded towards the spare boy.

The group looked hesitantly at Malfoy, unsure whether or not they should encourage him to go. Malfoy looked blankly at everyone before barely shrugging his shoulders in response.

"That's a yes if I've ever seen one," said Ginny.

"Well then, I suppose all of you should change into Muggle clothing. This Portkey will take you somewhere very Muggle and very special," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled.

"Yes!" Ginny immediately bolted for her room.

"Where, if I may ask, Professor?" Hermione naturally asked.



"Have you ever heard of Magic Kingdom?" Dumbledore winked.

As the rest of the group scattered out of the drawing room excitedly, Mrs. Weasley turned to Dumbledore with her hands on her hips.

"Why would you let them go off like that? It could be dangerous there too!" she exclaimed.

"Tonks will be there every step of the way. I rather doubt Voldemort would attack Magic Kingdom," Dumbledore smiled before his face fell into a more somber note.

"I also fear that their days ahead will continue to grow darker. I would feel guilty if I were not to allow them one more day of happiness."

"This is amazing," Ron immediately said in awe of the castle that stood in the center of the theme park.

"Do Muggles not really know about magic?" Ron whispered conspiratorially, "This place comes pretty close."

"No, Ron, they don't," sighed Hermione, "Muggles can be creative too."

"Look! Bubbles!" Ron immediately ran off to one of the gift shops where little children were blowing bubbles through seemingly magical devices.

"Mama, why is he so pale?" a little child pointed at Malfoy, "You said people brown when they're in the sun."

"I'm so sorry," gasped the squat mother, desperately trying to pull her child away.

"It's quite okay," chirped Ginny happily.

"Come on," Hermione tugged on Harry's hand much to Harry's surprise and glee. Ginny eyed their hands thoughtfully before tugging on Neville's hand.

"Come on, Neville! Let's go find Ron before he scares some Muggle child," Ginny pulled him along.

"But- but" Neville sputtered as he watch Harry and Hermione fade into the busy crowd.

"Oh they'll be fine! Hermione knows her way around Muggles. Oh my Merlin, what's that delicious smell?" Ginny sniffed in the air.

"Funnel cake?" a vendor asked from nearby, overhearing the accent of the red headed girl.

"Here," Ginny procured a fifty dollar bill from her pocket and immediately snatched the fried delight without another question.

"But Miss -" the vendor started.

"Sorry!" she apologized as she tore away, Neville in one hand and heaven in the other.

Malfoy looked around as he watched the others disappear. Shrugging, he started to walk to the large castle in the center of the park, marveling at what even Muggles could build.

On the other side of the park, Hermione was explaining the details and construction of some part of the park called Frontierland. She was gushing excitedly about the place, clutching Harry's arm every so often in excitement. Harry smiled along and had a feeling she wanted to get away from the other parts of the Trio for just a little while.

"Oh look! Splash Mountain! We have to ride it," Hermione continued excitedly.

"Hermione! Calm down, we'll get around to it. I've never seen you this excited," Harry chuckled.

"Sorry," she said breathlessly, "I've always wanted to go here. My parents told me about it once..."

Hermione trailed off at the mention of her parents, scrunching her nose ever so slightly. Harry gave her a sad look and patted her back.

"Do you miss them?"

"I do," she sighed, "But I know they'll be much safer in Australia. I'd never want to see them hurt and if sending them away keeps them safe, I'll live."

"That's awfully unselfish of you."

"Not really," Hermione shrugged, "Harry, look! A jungle cruise. Let's go!"

Harry laughed as Hermione tore off to get in line for the particular attraction. They spent the next two hours or so trying various rides and laughing gleefully the whole way. Harry had never seen Hermione so care free in the entire time he knew her. He laughed every time she recounted countless facts for each ride and shook his head as she clutched her arm as they rode Thunder Mountain. Harry loved the feeling of hurtling through the tracks on this roller coaster. It was not unlike riding a broom at some points. As they sat in the ride for Splash Mountain, Hermione turned to him with a sigh.

"Sometimes I wish we could just all get away from the War and just stay here. Why shouldn't we?"

"Good question," Harry replied, taking in the happy surroundings.

"I mean look at all these people," she lowered her voice so only Harry could hear, "They don't know about any War. They're just living their lives."

Harry thought for a moment before replying, "I suppose that's why we stay back home. We fight so everyone else can live their lives like this."

"Why should we fight?" Hermione asked a bit cynically.

"Because we care," Harry thought of his parents and the recent attack of his home, "Because we know if we don't, everyone we care about won't stand a chance."

Hermione nodded in agreement, looking at Harry appraisingly, "I suppose you're right. Makes you much more courageous than I am. Look at me! I'm practically begging to stay here."

"Don't worry yourself too much," Harry joked to lighten the mood, "I'd love to stay here too."

"Oh no," Hermione moaned, apprehensive but excited.

Harry could see the light at the end of the tunnel where he knew the ride would careen off a simulated cliff into a large body of water. Harry laughed as Hermione shrieked when the ride quickly descended, the water splashing all around them. The day continued magically for everyone as they hopped from one ride to another without a care in the world. Some time later, the group managed to find each other again. Even Malfoy was found near the Haunted Mansion attraction, staring in morbid fascination at the amusing tombstones.

"How'd you like it?" Hermione asked happily.

"We couldn't tear Ron away from Space Mountain. He didn't think Muggles created it," Neville joked.

"Look," Ron held a sort of portable mini-fan in his hand, "It blows air onto me!"

"Ron," Hermione chuckled, shaking her head at the boy's naivety.

The group turned to face Main Street, their eyes preparing for the loud boom of the fireworks. The Trio sat on one bench, Hermione predicatively between the other two boys as they squabbled over Ron's fascination with the Muggle toys. Harry looked on happily, knowing that he had enjoyed his time with Hermione. He sat on another bench with Ginny, happily sipping on a milkshake she had brought him. Malfoy occupied another bench with his arms splayed about it to indicate he was to be the only person on that particular bench. His face was neither smiling nor frowning, holding the same eerie passiveness ever since that night at Godric's Hollow.

"How'd you like your day?" Ginny asked cheekily.

"Loved it. Thank you."

"Not a problem. Hermione mentioned how she was annoyed at Neville by the Cho thing anyways."

"Really?"

"Couldn't you tell," she said dryly.

"Want to know something funny? Cho's been writing to me too," Harry revealed.

"That bitch," Ginny gasped, "You didn't tell Neville?"

"He'll learn too," Harry shrugged, knowing he was being a bit immature.

"Bitch."

"I get it, Ginny."

"If I didn't have so much fun today, she would have ruined it," reasoned Ginny.

"Today was fun wasn't it," Harry smiled as he stole a glance at Hermione.

"Best day ever," Ginny clinked her glass with his.

"Agreed."

The group watched as fireworks rocketed in the air, cheerfully whooping and hollering throughout the whole event.

"Avada Kedavra."

A body crumpled to the ground amongst a growing pile of other lifeless forms. Voldemort paced back and forth in front of a group of kneeling Death Eaters.

"I suppose I should expect that everyone would fail. The difficulty of detaining two teenagers is rather low. There is a risk, but why not send those that have yet to prove their worth?" Voldemort hissed as he balanced his wand between his fingers.

"Yet, here I am. Two dead, two more captured, and one almost burned alive."

A bright, green light filled the room as yet another body crumpled to death. There were only four more kneeling Death Eaters in the room. Voldemort continued to pace in front of them, eyeing each one thoughtfully as if he had been given a choice of delectable meals.

"Tell me, Rookwood. Why was Bates almost burned alive?" Voldemort questioned one of the kneeling Death Eaters.

"We underestimated the Potter boy. Bates says the boy was not there when they arrived at Godric's Hollow. During the...interrogation of the Malfoy boy and the whore, the Potter boy caught them off guard. We tried to catch him as soon as we noticed a disturbance, but he escaped," Rookwood fearfully explained.

"I see. This useless whelp of a Potter boy manages to kill two Death Eaters, burn the third one alive, and escape from three more Death Eaters," Voldemort levitated a body from his feet.

"Make no mistake; the boy is probably as useless as his father. I arrived at Godric's Hollow the first time with his father already dead and his mother gone, but perhaps it's the Potter boy I should be recruiting?" Voldemort rhetorically asked.

"Be gone, Rookwood. Fortunately for you, there is work to be done."

Rookwood kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes before hurriedly standing and leaving the chamber. Now, only three men knelt in front of the Dark Lord. Voldemort circled around them, swishing his wand about in a baton like manner.

"Avada Kedavra," he hissed again, raising his body count even higher.

He inhaled sharply, waving his hand in front of his face as if he were wafting a delicious smell to his nostrils, "That's how you kill a man. You can feel their tether to life leaving this plane."

"Selwyn, it was your nephew that accompanied Bates to Godric's Hollow. Since he is dead, you must bear the brunt of his punishment. Tell me, did you not teach him how to kill a man?"

"Daniel killed three men in cold blood before he was assigned to the raid, my Lord. He knew how to kill a man."

"Perhaps, you are correct. Evidently, he knew nothing of securing a ward around the house though. That speaks of incompetence. Were you not able to teach him properly?"

"I taught him plenty of -"

"Avada Kedavra."

Voldemort levitated the bodies so they surrounded the last Death Eater, "What do you think, Lucius? Did I serve the appropriate punishment?"

"Yes, my Lord," said the kneeling man.

"What do you think your punishment should be?" whispered Voldemort.

"What ever you deem, my Lord," Malfoy murmured.

"Always the perfect politician."

Voldemort dropped the bodies around Lucius with a sickening thud. He enchanted the dead Selwyn so the body would hop around him like a puppet on strings. Selwy's arms flailed about Lucius, taunting the man. Malfoy kept his ground, not daring to raise his head or give any indication he was disgusted by the soon to be rotting corpse.

"It's a shame you're so undeniably useful, Lucius. I would very much enjoy killing you," Voldemort sighed or at least made a noise that could be construed as a sigh.

"Peter. Bring it to me," Voldemort held one long claw out as poor Peter placed a small object into the claw.

"Do you know what this is Lucius?" Voldemort asked as he looked at the object with one eye.

"No, my Lord. I don't."

"I believe it's Egyptian in origin. It's a miniature hourglass," Voldemort started whispering to himself as he cast a spell on the tiny object.

"What makes this object so fascinating is that it's parasitic in a way. It needs to attach to a host and you have been selected to be the host."

"What does it do, my Lord," whispered Lucius.

To answer Lucius, Voldemort immediately seared the hourglass into the senior Death Eater's chest over where his heart would be. Lucius grunted in agony, not daring to scream or yell lest the Dark Lord increase the pain tenfold. As Voldemort completed the ritual, he ripped open Malfoy's robes to inspect his handiwork.

"You have five fortnights to complete the task that has been beset upon you," Voldemort explained as he admired his work of art.

"What is the task, my Lord," Lucius continued to wince the pain as he felt the insidious object worm its way into his heart.

"To kill your son of course. Since you failed so miserably to rid yourself of that whore of a wife, it's only logical that you must kill your son to recompense for your mistake. Your wife was a whore, Lucius; Rookwood found her dead with her legs spread open for Bates. Does that make you feel anything?"

"No, my Lord."



"Good," Voldemort paused, "Bella has informed that the team was unable to make progress on the tower. However, she was able to deduce that we would need an object from Hogwarts in order to raise it."

Voldemort paused as he assessed the oldest Malfoy, "The necessary preparations have been made to invade and extract the object out of Hogwarts. The old fool will think that Hogwarts is my end game and send the necessary forces needed to stop me at Hogwarts in order to take it back. I trust you can kill your son in this allotted time frame?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Excellent. Now leave. Preparations must be made."

"Christmas! Christmas! Christmas! Get up!" Ginny tore through Grimmauld Place, opening each door and bouncing on the respective owner's bed for an allotted time before moving onto the next victim.

Harry rubbed his eyes as he stumbled into the drawing room, giving Ron a high five along the way for his ability to somehow walk in a straight line. Harry saw that Hermione, Ginny, and most of the other adults were already seated around a makeshift tree.

"Merry Christmas dear," Lily leaned forward to give her son a peck on the cheek.

"Merry Christmas Mum," Harry yawned as he jammed a poorly wrapped gift into her hand.

"Please don't let it be another book," she facetiously whispered into the air.

Harry glared at her as she opened a package containing a set of green earrings. Lily smiled and shook her head at her only son. Harry shrugged in response, "Don't worry, I stole your money to buy it."

Lily slapped Harry's shoulder with a laugh as she stowed away the gift with her other ones. She searched among a brightly colored pile

of well wrapped gifts before finding the one she had bought for her son. She excitedly handed it to her son.

"Oh Mum, you shouldn't have," Harry dryly said as he weighed the object in his hands.

"Oh yes."

"I love it," Harry jokingly patronized the gift but enjoyed it nonetheless. His mother always bought him next year's Potion's textbook each Christmas.

"You know it's my -"

"- favorite subject. I think I've gotten the point by now," Harry winked.

The others exchanged gifts happily. Harry could spot Ron giving Hermione a bottle of perfume while Neville had bought her some book of sorts. Harry made his way to Ginny and handed her an unwrapped object.

"A mirror? Really, I'm going to war and you're giving me a mirror?"

"Dazzle your enemies."

"Really?"

"No."

"Then why a mirror?"

"You never know where you might find a good looking bloke that - OW - don't hit me!"

"You deserved it."

"Okay, fine, it's not just a mirror," Harry produced a similar mirror he had been holding behind him, "Ta da!"

"Great, we have matching mirrors," Ginny replied dryly.

"No, idiot. Look at it," Harry raised his own mirror to his face.

"Oh. My. Merlin," Ginny gasped as she stared at Harry through her own mirror, "Where'd you find this?"

"Well my Dad gave me this one when I was younger and then I saw the other matching pair here. I don't know what it was doing here, but once I figured out it was the matching pair, I knew it had to be for you," Harry explained.

"That way, when you're off doing Fudge's dirty work - if you can find a way to get away for a little, come call us," Harry smiled at her.

"You silly boy," Ginny rushed to him to give a hug.

Pulling back, she looked at him fiercely, "If you don't have Hermione by the time I come back, I will kill you."

"Don't worry, I have a showstopper for her gift as well," Harry winked.

"Harry - all grown up," she said in somber fakeness.

Even though he had talked up Hermione's gift in front of Ginny, it was a different task all together to lasso Hermione away from Neville and Ron. Eventually, Ron had predictably walked away for some cookies while Neville was busy talking to Professor Lupin. Hermione was sitting by herself, smiling and reading a letter from her parents.

"Hermione," Harry cleared his throat.

"Harry!" she stood and gave him a bone-crushing hug, "I can't believe I haven't seen you yet. I have your present!"

She rushed around to a carefully organized pile. Extracting a small package, she bounced around the couch and thrust it into Harry's hands. Harry grinned and opened the package to find a wrist holster with a thin strand of what looked to be string attached to it.

"Watch. Wrap the string around your wand," Hermione said as Harry looked at it with confusion.

Harry did as instructed and watched as Hermione pulled out her own wand and quickly performed a Disarming charm on him. Harry's wand sailed out of his wand but stopped in mid-air as the string held strong.

"Unicorn hair," she looked impressed even by her own gift, "Thought it'd be useful for you. You've gotten quite good at dueling."

Harry's jaw was still open as he inspected the powerful item, "Wow. Thanks, Hermione!"

"No problem," she looked happy that Harry liked his gift.

"My turn," Harry gave her a neatly packaged, rectangular object. Hermione eagerly but carefully unwrapped the gift. Her face froze as she traced the outline of the picture.

"The frame's my Mum's, but I think you know where the picture is from," Harry explained.

The gift was a Muggle picture that Harry, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Ron had taken while they were on their impromptu vacation. They stood in linked arms in front of the faux magical castle, their smiles bright upon their faces.

"Durate et vosmet rebus servate secundis," she repeated as she traced the words etched in the silver frame.

"Carry on and preserve yourselves for better times," Harry translated, "It's Latin. It's a promise we'll go back someday when this is all over."

Hermione still looked shocked at the picture before thrusting her hand out.

"I want my gift back."

"Err, what?"

"My gift's not good enough, give it back."

"No," Harry said in an amused tone, "Your gift is far more useful."

"But yours is better," Hermione whined.

"Hermione, I'm not giving it back."

"Fine," Hermione huffed.

"Thank you," she said as she clutched the picture to her chest.

"You're welcome," Harry beamed.

Hermione rushed off to carefully place her gift inside a specially charmed, unbreakable bag. Harry headed over to Ron and Neville to produce matching Canon jerseys, much to Ron's excitement and Neville's amusement. Once the festivities winded down, the group moved into the kitchen to enjoy some food that Mrs. Weasley cooked up. As the chattering group marched their way down the staircase, Harry caught up with his mother and linked arms with her.

"Dad coming?" Harry asked.

"I don't think so," Lily looked at him painfully, "I hope you understand Harry, but they needed people to be a lookout. We're pretty unguarded at this time."

Harry nodded his head, expecting this news, "It's alright, I was just wondering. It's probably for the better."

"Why do you say that?" Lily frowned.

"Well - you know - him and Sirius," Harry dropped his voice, hoping the latter person was not lurking around a corner.

"Their relationship is complicated," Lily sighed, "But yes, perhaps it is for the better."

The day passed jovially, most of the regular group relaxing around a warm fire, eggnog and delightfully singing cookies abound. Harry was pleased to see Ron wear his Canons jersey for the whole night as well as fending off Hermione's repeated gestures of gratitude for his gift. As he sat on the ground in front of the couch where Ginny and Hermione excitedly chit chatted, Harry noticed a lone figure walk into the drawing room and take a seat by the window. Harry did not recall Malfoy during the gift exchange and suddenly remembered something.

"Be right back, guys," Harry informed them as he hastily stood up and jogged to his room.

Harry returned to the room with something clutched in his left hand. Hermione looked at him questioningly from her spot on the couch to which Harry could only shrug in reply. Hesitantly making his way to Malfoy, Harry coughed loudly to inform the boy of his presence. Malfoy did not turn for a second but eventually shifted his head so Harry could make out the side profile of his face against the moonlight.

"I didn't see you earlier but here," Harry thrust two wands in Malfoy's direction.

"It's your wand and your...Mum's. I would have given them to you earlier, but I forgot about them after - well - you know..." Harry trailed off awkwardly.

Malfoy turned fully around in his chair and narrowed his eyes at the two wands in Harry's hand. He carefully plucked the pair of wands and dangled what Harry thought was his mother's wand in his hands. After a moment, Malfoy placed both wands in his lap and nodded his head so slightly that Harry could have sworn that Malfoy did not do it. Malfoy then turned around and continued to look at the moon.

Well that's that.

Harry returned to the rest of the group and sat down heavily at Hermione's feet. The group had obviously watched the exchange and Harry could see the differing reactions on their faces.

"That was real nice of you," Hermione softly complimented him.

Harry could see Ron biting his lip to hold back a response, "Thanks, Hermione. I just didn't want his wand anymore."

Hermione smiled softly, though Harry could not see it, at Harry's deflection. Neville looked at him thoughtfully before turning his face to the fire once more.

"Still seems suspicious to me," Ron could not help himself. His only saving grace was that he said it quietly enough so that Malfoy should not have heard him.

"Ron..." Hermione warned.

"How about we don't fight?" Ginny interrupted them, "I only have one more week here before I have to leave. I'd rather do it on a happy note."

"Ginny's right," Neville proclaimed, much to Ginny's blushing, "Let's not waste our time bickering."

Ron and Hermione glared at each other but said nothing. Hermione turned to Ginny to animatedly talk to her about an uncharacteristically female topic while Harry steered the conversation to Quidditch as he conversed with Ron and Neville. The group talked well into the night, laughing and reminiscing at various Hogwarts memories. Malfoy remained silent, studiously sitting in the corner.

The rest of the break raced quickly by Harry and soon enough, it was time to head back to Hogwarts. At least, for him to head back to Hogwarts. There was a tearful goodbye as Ginny departed with some obviously overworked Ministry types. Tears were shed in gallons as the large crowd of Weasleys and assorted friends said goodbye to the youngest chick in the nest. Harry repeatedly reminded her to use the mirror whenever she could. Eventually, Ginny Weasley left to fight a war she was too young for and for a Minister that wanted nothing more than to keep his job.

Eventually, Harry returned to Hogwarts, already missing his friend and hoping for contact soon. Though he had grown closer to the Trio, especially Hermione, he knew he would never be able to cut into the tight bond that tethered the three teenagers. Without the company of Ginny, Harry was forced to play the outside wheel to the teenagers. Though Malfoy's problems were much bigger than his, Harry understood why the boy kept to himself most of the times now. An irritable Harry entered the first defense class of the new year and sourly sat next to Seamus and Dean.

"Look a little sour, Harry. What's wrong? Girl troubles?" Seamus teased.

"What did ever happen with Cho?" Dean probed.

"Nothing," Harry replied gruffly. He had been steadfastly avoiding the two-timing bint since he arrived.

"It's a shame. Quite a catch she would have been," Seamus whistled forlornly.

"Well, I'm glad to have my hands rid off her," Harry waved to a disgruntled looking Hermione.

"Don't look now, Harry, but I don't think she's gone just yet," Dean pointed out two people near the doorway to the classroom.

Indeed, Cho Chang seemed to be having an amicable conversation with Neville, obviously keeping the boy from entering the classroom. Neville chuckled at something she said before indicating that he needed to enter the class. Cho nodded and roved her eyes across the classroom. Harry quickly turned his head so he did not meet her eye. Scribbling nonsense into his notes, Harry took a quick peek and saw that the older girl had left.

"Welcome back, class!" Professor Sheppard exclaimed as he waltzed into the room.

"Hullo, Professor," the class tiredly replied though it was almost noon.

"Aren't you all the sunny lot? That's no way to enter the second half of the curriculum. Now, all of you might be wondering what "Advanced Defense" meant on your curriculum when you started the term. Well, I'm here to tell you that your last grade in this class will be based solely on one project that will occupy the rest of the year," Sheppard hopped onto his desk and examined his students. The students murmured at Sheppard's surprise.

The rest of the year? What could we possibly be doing?

Before Harry could linger longer on his thoughts, Sheppard erased the chalkboard with his wand and replaced it with a metallic looking map of Hogwarts. The castle was divided into different beige colored sectors with each sector containing a differing amount of points.

"This is a map of Hogwarts sans house common rooms. Your project for the rest of the year is to form an army of peers and conquer these areas. The army with the most number of points at



the end of the project, wins this game so to speak. But you will not be graded on whether or not you win or lose," Sheppard pointed out.

"You will be graded on your ability in combat and your ability to help each other. War is not some two-on-two skirmish. It's a constant grind of focus and strategy. One small slip up will allow your opponent to strike at you. One lapse of concentration could spell the end of your army."

The students were now buzzing excitedly as they leaned over the desks to examine the map of Hogwarts. Harry was nearly tipping the edge of his seat to examine the map and saw many other students were doing so as well. The only student who remained in a sedentary position was Malfoy.

"The catch? I will not be assigning armies. Another aspect of War is a person's ability to lead and command his or her troops," Sheppard paced the classroom as he assessed each student, "It is up to you to become a leader. I will not assign an army an allotted amount of students and I will not have a limit on the number of armies."

Harry frowned at this unnatural gesture. Was Professor Sheppard intentionally rigging this game? Harry could already formulate some groups that would not stand a chance, most notably the Slytherins. Sheppard only smiled at the students as they took in the information.

"You will have up until tomorrow at noon to finalize your armies. Why don't we begin now?" Sheppard came to a stop in the exact middle of the students in the classroom, "Any volunteers to lead one army?"

The classroom erupted in whispers as they pointed out likely leaders. Many eyes were expectantly turned towards Neville Longbottom. After all, he was the Boy-Who-Lived. Who better to lead an army than the one person who defeated the antagonist of the real War?

"I'll do it," Neville said softly as the buzz around him grew.

"Unsurprising choice," Sheppard nodded as he waved his wand at the board. Neville's name immediately appeared on the side of the metallic board in a deep red.

"Anyone else?" Sheppard called out.

The rest of the fifth-year students shifted uncomfortably as they looked around for another choice. Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff once or twice tried to raise his hand but thought better of it and lowered his appendage. The Slytherins looked nervously around each other, all of them clearly avoiding looking at Malfoy. It seemed as if the Slytherin boy fell out of favor with the rest of the group. The leaderless Slytherins kept trying to convince one another to stand up but none of them could do so.

"I'll do it," Dean and Seamus looked at Harry as if he had suddenly sprouted wings and become a Hippogriff.

"Mr. Potter," Sheppard sounded surprise but pleased, "How nice of you to join in."

Sheppard waved his wand and Harry watched his name etch itself onto the metal board in a royal blue. Harry gulped, not quite knowing what he had exactly gotten himself into. He was simply angry at the rest of the students indecision in stepping up to the challenge. Harry knew that part of the reason was the fact that Neville was in charge of the other army. Who would want to go up against the Boy-Who-Lived? But Harry knew that the boy was not invincible.

Harry turned slightly and caught Neville's astonished face. Ron looked positively dumbfounded and slightly angry while the rest of the class looked at Harry with a combination of surprise and nervousness. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat, pulling his collar as the room suddenly became unbearably stiff. Had it always been this hot in Defense?

"Anyone else?" Sheppard called out, clearly not expecting anyone to step up. Unsurprisingly, no one stepped forward to lead another army.

"It's settled then," Sheppard clapped his wands and a series of sparks flashed around Harry and Neville's names, "I will explain the rules of engagement Wednesday. For now, know that any participation in this game is to only be had during this Defense class. I have approved this with Professor Dumbledore, but if I find any of you jinxing each other out of class, I will expel you without another thought. Is that clear?"

The class nodded in response.

"Now, we have a little time left. Potter. Longbottom. Step up here; the armies would like to see their generals," Harry and Neville walked to the front of the class and turned to face their peers.

"It's time to recruit! Students, form your armies," Sheppard stepped back to take a seat and watch the proceedings unfold.

Harry and Neville nervously looked at the Professor before staring at each other. Neville shrugged and turned to face the students. Barely a second had passed before Ron immediately stood and walked to Neville's side, making sure to give Harry a withering glance as he did so. Ernie Macmillan stood and made his way to Neville's side as well. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Hannah Abbot soon followed their close friend. Susan Bones hesitantly stood before awkwardly shifting her way to Neville's side. Six more Hufflepuffs that Harry did not know the names of joined Neville's army, much to Harry's sinking displeasure.

There goes all the Hufflepuffs. Typical.

Harry shifted from foot to foot, well aware that no one had stepped up to his side. His eyes caught Hermione's eyes, but he refused to plead for her help. She was staring at him in confusion, no doubt puzzled by Harry's sudden leap for power. As far as she had known, Harry was never one to step into the limelight. She hesitantly stood and made her way to Neville, her eyes trained on Harry the whole time. Harry kept his eyes straight ahead, refusing to meet her gaze. Lavender and Parvati immediately followed Hermione, clearly trusting their dorm mate.

Neville currently had fifteen people in his army while Harry had one: himself.

Harry was beginning to think that volunteering to lead an army was an awful idea. He considered creating a spell that could tunnel through the ground and lead him to China but was interrupted by a sharp gasp reverberating throughout the classroom. Harry looked up to see Draco Malfoy walking straight towards him. Harry blinked, not quite believing the turn of events, as Malfoy stood slightly behind him and gazed out of the classroom into the blue sky over Hogwarts. The rest of the students broke their heated silence as they suddenly whispered to each other, pointing at Harry and Malfoy the whole

time. Even Sheppard's eyebrows were raised as he watched the unlikely ally stand stoically at Harry's side.

Great. This is definitely NOT going to help recruiting.

Harry wanted to yell at Malfoy to leave but could not do so in front of the class. Harry had learned his first lesson in being a leader; never decline help, even if it came from the most unlikely of sources. As Harry gritted his teeth, he was surprised to find Seamus and Dean disengage from their heated conversation and walk up towards him. They both nodded at him as they joined his side.

At last, Harry was grateful that someone had joined his army. Padma Patil, Parvati's twin, stood and made her way to Harry's side as well. In the end, two Ravenclaws joined Neville's army while no more students joined Harry's. There was still a number of undecided students, mostly Slytherins, by the time the bell for class ended.

"I will go over the rest of the procedures on Wednesday! Friday will be your first engagement!" Sheppard yelled over the voices of the students.

Neville awkwardly swam through the crowd to stand in front of Harry and offer his hand, "Good luck, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry said dazedly as he shook Neville's hand. Neville nodded stiffly before exiting the room.

"Why'd you have to do this Harry?" Ron whispered angrily as he passed by his roommate, "We could have just combined armies and crushed whoever formed the other one."

Harry did not respond but simply gazed back at Ron. Ron shook his head in frustration before taking his leave as well. Hermione looked at him queerly as she gathered her belongings. She continued to observe him as if he were some strange specimen as she made her way out of the classroom and out of sight.

Sighing, Harry turned to his four person army and cracked a half-grin, "Welcome to Potter's army."

Harry ran his hands through his hair as he examined the names of all the fifth-year students in front of him.

"...Longbottom always does everything. It'd be fun to take him and Ron down a peg for once," Dean explained to Padma.

"I know what you mean! I love Parvati, but I'll be damned if I pass up the opportunity to one up her," the Ravenclaw girl grinned.

"Any progress Harry?" Seamus asked as he tossed a toy Quaffle in the air.

The four of them were in the library, hidden from view of the rest of the students. The fifth member of their army declined to join them in their brainstorming session. Malfoy had stared at Harry when the Gryffindor asked him whether or not he was coming to the library. After Harry asked his question, the boy had simply walked away without any response. Harry took this gesture as a no.

"No," Harry gnawed at his quill, "All the Slytherins are still left. I heard Terry Boot went and joined Neville, which means Anthony Goldstein will probably follow suit."

"Don't forget Mandy," Parvati interrupted, "She's practically in love with Terry."

"Great," Harry crossed off another name on the list, "That brings the count to Neville - twenty. Us - five."

"Sorry, I'm late," Michael Corner suddenly appeared, "Padma told me that you'd meeting here?"

"Yeah, thanks," Harry gratefully pulled out a seat for the boy. Harry turned to look at him fully, suddenly remembering that Michael and Ginny had seen each other a few times before she left.

"I assume you're joining us then?" Dean asked.

"Yeah," Corner nodded enthusiastically, "Ginny always said Harry was better at Defense than we all thought."

Harry made a mental note to buy Ginny something expensive for her next birthday.

"Well that raises the count to six," Harry crossed off Michael's name.

"Well Kevin and Lisa both joined Neville's army as well, so..." Michael trailed off as he delivered the bad news.

"Brilliant, that brings the count to Neville - twenty-two. Us - six," Harry crossed off more names from the list and rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"Bem and Kellah will probably join Neville," Seamus pessimistically reasoned, "Those dunderheads will just follow Lavender and Parvati. I swear it's like you don't even know those two existed."

"Neville - twenty-four. Us -six."

"That leaves only Su Li from my house," Padma counted off the invisible numbers, "And the rest of the Slytherins," she added as an afterthought.

"And even if we get the rest of the Slytherins, that only brings us to twenty-four versus sixteen. We're vastly outnumbered," Michael concluded. Harry took off his glasses as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Why exactly did you volunteer, Harry?" Padma asked.

Why did I volunteer?

Harry sat with his thoughts as he tried to dissect why he volunteered to lead an army. It was suicidal to compete against Neville. Although Harry knew he could challenge Neville in a straight duel, Harry seemingly forgot about the draw the Boy-Who-Lived carried. The Hufflepuffs immediately flocked to him as they saw him as a safe haven. They would all follow Ernie once Ernie had made his decision to join Neville. Ron, of course, would join Neville's side immediately. Harry had held out hopes that Hermione would join his side but knew that was a lost cause. No matter how much their friendship had grown so far, she would choose Neville first.

For now.

"Thought it'd be fun," Harry shrugged cavalierly.

"Awesome," Seamus grinned, "I love the underdog mentality."

"Well, we're going to need more than that," said Michael, "Do you trust Malfoy?"

"Not really," Harry knew that none of them knew the full disclosure of the events at Godric's Hollow, "But he'll be alright."

"So what do we do now...General," smirked Dean.

"We find a way to get the Slytherins to fight for us without cursing us and start planning for Friday. We're going to be outmanned and honestly out talented if the Slytherins are joining us. We're going to need to pull every trick out of the hat to do well in this thing. So let's get started."

A/N: I assumed that every house had 10 students (five male/five female). Researching up some HP lexicon corroborated my belief for the most part save for some minor details, but for the sake of the story, there are 10 students in each house. As always, reviews are very much welcome.

## Twenty-Four versus Seven

Harry crossed Su Li of Ravenclaw from his list of names. Padma managed to convince the Asian girl to join their army despite the superior size of Neville's army. Su Li shrugged and eventually joined, knowing that their sole grade was not entirely based on whether or not they could win the game. True, the army that won the game was more likely to be graded higher on account of having superior duelists, but that did not mean joining Harry's army would lead the students to lower grades. They just had to perform their part well in order to receive the corroborating grade.

It was two hours before noon and Harry had yet to finalize his army. To Harry's knowledge, the remaining Slytherins had contact neither Harry nor Neville's army. Harry knew that in order to stand an even remote chance against Neville's army, Harry had to recruit the rest of the Slytherins, untrustworthy as they may be. Barely getting four hours of sleep from the previous night, Harry gathered himself together and made his way to the library where he would hopefully find Malfoy. Harry owed the boy the previous night in order to arrange a meeting in hopes that the Slytherin boy would convince his housemates to join Harry's army.

Harry quickly exited the common room to reach the library. As he passed by a tapestry of someone trying to teach trolls ballet, however, Harry remembered that he forgot the list of names on the common room table. As he turned out, Harry was quite surprised to find Luna standing right behind him.

"Luna?" Harry asked, looking around the hall for any classrooms she might have exited. There was none.

"Hello Harry," Luna said in a much more somber tone than Harry had ever heard from her.

"What are you doing here?" Harry was still perplexed on how she ended up behind him when he just walked by this empty corridor. Harry knew she could not Apparate; he read it in *Hogwarts, A History*.

"Nothing," she simply replied, her eyes glued to her fidgeting feet.



"Okay," Harry said suspiciously, still looking around the hall, "Nice seeing you around. I'll tell Ginny you say hi."

"Okay, Harry," she said, not meeting his eyes.

Strange girl.

Harry ran back to the common room. He already wasted enough time and did not know if Malfoy would actually be at the library. The earlier he arrived, the better. As he told the Fat Lady the password, Harry was surprised to see Hermione picking up the list of names from the table. He cautiously made her way to her until he was standing almost behind her.

"Seems like you need some help," she stated without turning around.

"Why? Are you offering?" Harry said light-heartedly.

Hermione smiled at his jest before her face contorted into a frown, "I don't like this, Harry."

"Like what?"

"These two separate armies. It's only going to fester competition and dislikes amongst the other people. It doesn't help that the armies are going to split with most of the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws in one army while all the Slytherins are on the rest!" Hermione exasperatedly gave the list to Harry.

Taking the list gingerly, Harry tucked it into his pocket, "Well with any luck I'll be able to help out the Slytherins."

"Ron thinks you're nutters, but I think it's very brave of you to do this," she gestured at an invisible crowd, "People aren't going to like you that much around here."

"People have never liked me that much, Hermione," Harry explained sadly, "I've always been just Harry. I've always been Harry, the guy whose boggart was his parents fighting. I've always been Harry, the kid who's always studying."

"I've never thought of you like that," Hermione frowned.

"Maybe not on purpose," Harry admitted as he cast his eyes downwards, "But you've always been so busy with Neville and Ron to notice. You three with all your important adventures and tasks."

"It's not all fun and games," Hermione warned.

"I know. For once though, I'd like to get some recognition for something other than being the other kid."

Hermione frowned as she digested Harry's words. She suddenly stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Harry, burying her bushy mane into his chest.

"I think I understand," she pulled back to look at him in the eye, "If you ever need me, don't be scared to come talk to me because of this stupid game."

"Me? Scared? Never," Harry scoffed with a wink.

Hermione smiled before she playfully pushed him away, "Go on. Ron's convinced Neville he doesn't need the help of the Slytherins so it's all up to you."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry gave her shoulder a squeeze.

An hour later, Harry sat impatiently at a back desk in the library. There was only an hour left before the deadline to submit the armies expired. There was no sign of Malfoy and Harry knew no way to reach any of the Slytherins. Without the location of the Slytherin common room, Harry was about to resort to roaming the halls for random Slytherins. To Harry's relief, he finally spotted a mop of disheveled blond hair making his way to the back of the library.

"Oi, Malfoy, over here!" Harry said in a loud whisper.

Malfoy continued in his unhurried pace and sat down in the empty chair next to Harry. He regarded Harry coolly, his face stonily impassive. Taking a deep breath, Harry began to explain the situation to Malfoy.

"There's only seven of us right now. It's seven versus twenty-four. They're terrible odds. I need you to talk to the rest of the Slytherins

and convince them to join my army. Do you think they would do that?"

Malfoy took a second to respond before nodding slightly.

"Good, can you tell them then before noon?" Harry asked hopefully.

Malfoy paused for the same amount of time before shaking his head ever so slightly.

"Why not?"

Malfoy just blankly stared at him.

"Malfoy," Harry growled in frustration, "How can I get in touch with them then?"

"Great Hall. They're waiting," Malfoy spoke in a barely audible whisper.

"Thank you," Harry exhaled deeply, not wanting to vent his frustrations out on Malfoy for once.

I never thought Malfoy as a mute could be worse than regular Malfoy.

It took Harry approximately fifteen minutes to reach the Great Hall, leaving Harry close to half an hour before the time expired. He could feel the eyes on his back as he approached the Slytherin table, where the collective group were waiting at the end of the table. Harry took a deep breath to stop the shakes in his hands. Nott seemed to have to taken the de facto leadership position and glared at him coldly.

Now or never.

"Nott, can I speak with you," Harry asked, seeing the Gryffindors watch him out of the corner of his eye.

"You can speak right here, Potter," Nott wanted an audience for this hearing.

"Alright," Harry flushed, "You need to join my army. It's the only chance any of us have at beating Neville."

"Longbottom?" Nott snorted, "We could just form our own army and still have more people than you."

"And then Neville will just steamroll you for the rest of the semester," Harry coolly replied, "You don't have to listen to me. You don't even have to fight all that well, but the net gain of joining forces is greater than fighting him apart. You should be able to see that."

Nott sat in contemplative silence, the other Slytherins watching his every move, before replying, "We'll join you, Potter, but we won't listen to every order you say. The Slytherins listen to me. Deal or no deal?"

Harry hesitated before sticking out his hand, "Deal."

Nott laughed as he waved Harry's hand off, "I'm not shaking your hand, Potter."

"Shake or else I'll leave you and your merry band of followers to fend for yourselves," Harry whispered so only the Slytherins could hear.

Nott hissed at him, clearly furious at being power played in front of the rest of his housemates. The older students watched the scene with mild interest, their eyes flickering back and forth between Nott and Potter. The Gryffindor table also had their eyes on the situation, carefully regarding Harry's outstretched hand.

Nott slowly shook Harry's hand, attempting to crush it in the process, "You'll pay for that, Potter."

"Pleasure to join forces," Harry grunted out with a fake smile as he forcibly withdrew his hand.

Harry quickly made for the Great Hall exit but not before catching the gaze of his Gryffindor classmates. Harry did his best to place a half smirk on his face before giving the rest of the Gryffindor a casual two finger salute as he exited the Great Hall.

"You know, he's kind of sexy like this," Lavender gushed as she watched Harry leave.

"Shut up, Lavender," Ron grumbled.

What have I gotten myself into?

Harry entered the Wednesday Defense class with Neville's army firmly situated on the left half of the classroom. There was an obvious divide between Neville's army and Harry's army inside the classroom. Hermione sat near the middle, but still distinctively on Neville's side, of the groups with an annoyed look on her face. Harry shot a confused look at Padma as he carefully took a seat next to her.

"They came in like this," she weakly explained.

Harry looked to the other side of the classroom to find the Hufflepuffs scowling at him angrily, "Any reason they're so angry?"

"No, they've been like that to the rest of us the whole time," Seamus chirped, blowing a kiss to Hannah Abbott. Hannah did not respond in kind.

"Harry," Seamus nudged him.

Neville approached Harry and stood in front of him, "Harry, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure," Harry stood and walked with Neville to the front of the classroom, away from the prying ears of the rest of the students.

"Listen," Neville started, "I don't want you to take anything personally. I know some of the people are taking this way too seriously but just know that no matter what - I - we - I mean - Ron, Hermione, and I don't hold anything against you."

"Not even Ron?" Harry said with a half smile.

"We'll knock him around eventually."

"Don't worry, I think I can handle it."

"Good," Neville nodded, "Good luck again."

"You're the one that's going to need it, Neville," Harry left before Neville could reply.

Did I really just say that?

"Welcome class!" Sheppard said with obvious enthusiasm.

"I received the lists of students yesterday, on time if I may add," Sheppard waved his wand at the metallic board and started inscribing the names of each student under their respective armies.

"Again, NONE of you will take this OUT of class," Sheppard barked out certain words in order to emphasize the gravity of the situation.

"This is strictly an in-class assignment and will be handled IN-class," Sheppard drove his point home by slamming his fist on the table.

"Now," Sheppard said after he thought he made his point clear, "I'll explain the assignment in more depth."

"Same safety rules apply for the entire project. I have eyes and ears everywhere in this castle. I will know," Sheppard pointedly looked at each group.

"This map shows the entire playable area of Hogwarts. I have not included the common rooms and other high locale areas for obvious reasons. I have, however, included the Great Hall. Since this assignment will take part in class, the corridors and rooms will be largely empty and any wandering students will be redirected."

Sheppard tapped his wand several times against the metallic board to enlarge the number of points in the different shaded territories.

"The goal of each army is to have more points than the other army by the end of the term. You gain points by capturing these different zones, each of which have a different number of points," Sheppard used his wand as a pointing stick as he pointed to the separate shaded areas.

"You capture areas by using the this spell," Sheppard drew the name of the spell in the air, "Expugno. Repeat it."

"Expugno," the class repeated.

"Good. You can only perform this spell, however, if no member of the other army is within ten feet of the capture point. The capture point are tall flags in the center of the zones."

"To defeat an opponent, you must rid them of their wand and stun them. If they do not have their wand but are not stunned, they remain in play. Once a student is stunned and wandless, however, they are out of play for the duration of the class period. Once either army loses all of its player for the class period, the skirmish is over. If there are still players remaining when class is over, those players receive a bonus."

"All zones that have been captured by each army will carry over to the next skirmish. All of the students will then start again within their own previously captured territories. For example, if Mr. Thomas successfully captures Zone 7 but is subsequently defeated as the last remaining member of Potter's army, Potter's army will own Zone 7 and any other subsequent zones for the next skirmish. He can then choose the students who will be placed in that zone or any other zone for the next skirmish."

"Are there any questions?" Sheppard asked. All of the students were hurriedly writing down the instructions of the project with a temerity that Sheppard had never seen before. Nothing festered improvement more than competition.

"No? Okay then. I will be judging all of you throughout this whole process. The army that has the most accumulated points at the final skirmish will receive a slight bonus. Do not let this fact deter the other army. Remember, this is your final grade for this class," Sheppard warned.

"Are there any questions?"

"You said that anyone is in play as long as they're not stunned. Correct?" Hermione asked.

"Yes."

"So you're allowing physical combat?" Hermione clearly did not like this idea.

"To an extent...yes," Sheppard nodded.

"So I can hit someone?" Crabbe dumbly asked.

"You can attempt to retrieve your wand, Mr. Crabbe. Any unnecessary force will enjoy my company in detention for the rest of the term," Sheppard coldly answered.

"Any more questions? Yes, Mr. Finnigan."

"Are we getting medals for this?"

"Detention, Mr. Finnigan, for your cheek."

"So what do you think we should do?" Su Li asked a pacing Harry Potter.

Seamus, Dean, Padma, Michael, Su Li, and Harry were plotting inside an empty classroom. Malfoy, once again, declined to join them and Harry did not bother to ask the rest of the Slytherins. He had to assume they would operate mostly on their own and that he would need to formulate a plan to fit their means.

"The Great Hall has the most points with 33. That's a full third of the total 100 points," Harry muttered to himself.

"It's going to be near impossible to hold that forever. It's far too open and they have far too many people," Padma reasoned as she examined her own map of Hogwarts that Sheppard handed out to each student.

"Not impossible," Harry interjected, "We just have to have more points than them. We can concede the Great Hall if we capture enough zones to garner 51 points."

"But the Great Hall is in the middle of all the zones. If they have the Great Hall, they can easily reach the other zones at any time throughout the skirmishes," Su Li countered.



"She's right," Dean agreed with the Ravenclaw, "We'd be picked apart if they hold the Great Hall the whole time."

"So we have to contest for the Great Hall but hold the other zones in the meantime," Harry drew some sketches on his miniature map of Hogwarts.

"We don't have nearly enough people for that, they'll outman us at every point," Michael pointed out.

The group fell silent as they tried to solve this quagmire of a situation. How could they possibly defeat Neville's army when they held an eight person advantage? There were only 10 zones to spread across the sixteen people of Harry's army. Even if they held an estimated 5 of them to garner 51 points, that would leave approximately three people to hold off each zone against twenty-four more people. Considering that the Slytherins would most likely stick together, the weaker students, Crabbe and Goyle mostly, would obviously be the weak link of the group.

"Can we even trust the Slytherins to hold up their end?" Seamus asked.

"Nott will not want to lose to Neville, but I fear that they're not talented enough to compete anyways. We have to match them up against the Hufflepuffs. They would neutralize each other while we deal with the big guns," Harry wrote Neville and Hermione's names on the chalkboard and circled both of them.

Michael let out a low whistle, "They're going to be a handful."

"I can handle them in spurts, but I'll need your help," Harry turned to face his lieutenants, "Neville will force the issue while Hermione's going to know every spell you can think of to defend, attack, and do both at the same time."

"Whatever we do, we must keep them separate for as long as possible," Harry drew a vertical line between their names to emphasize his point, "The longer they are apart, the better chance we have of not being overrun at any one point."

"Keep Neville and Hermione apart; what a lovely task that will be," Seamus said under his breath.

"What about Malfoy? He barely responds to anything," Padma asked.

"He'll show up," Harry said more confidently than he felt.

"How do you know that?"

"He won't want to lose."

"But he just gave himself up last time he dueled with you."

"Just trust me, he won't want to lose," Harry insisted. The rest of the group exchanged surprised glances but did not speak up.

"Harry," Su Li said as she looked at her map, "If we can't get through the Great Hall, they're going to hold all the zones from the owlery courtyard and the Great Hall. We have to fight for the Great Hall first."

"Not necessarily," Padma pointed out, "Since we start out near the courtyard by the Divination classroom, we'll have the advantage on all the zones near the Entrance Hall."

"If they break through the Entrance Hall, we're going to be pinned back in the other zones," Seamus sighed, "This won't be easy. At least most of the classrooms are going to be empty for this."

"It won't be easy. None of this will be easy, but I think we can do it," Harry examined his mini-map once again.

"We still haven't solved the Great Hall problem," Su Li pointed out.

"I think I have an idea. Come here and look," Harry began to trace a plan onto his mini-map while the rest of the group watched.

Had Malfoy been there, even he would have been impressed by Harry's plan.

Harry spent the next two nights fitfully dreaming he was an owl watching himself stumble over his feet and lose his wand as he tried to fight in the Great Hall. The rest of his day was plagued by constantly being bumped into by the rest of his Gryffindor

housemates (mostly Ron) and listening to his group's extended plans for the Friday fight. He could frequently see Neville's entire group arranged before the Boy-Who-Lived as he passed by various empty classrooms. Harry had not heard from the Slytherins at all.

One hour before Defense class started, Harry found himself in the owlery, trying to find an owl to deliver a letter to James. Harry explained his situation in Defense class in the letter and asked his Dad for any advice he might have on the situation. When he found a suitable school owl to do the job, he entrusted it with the scroll of parchment and let the owl fly away. As he left the owlery, however, Harry finally bumped into Cho.

"Cho," Harry greeted coldly before trying to move past her.

"Harry!" she grabbed onto his shoulder, blocking his movement, "I haven't talked to you since you've been back. You didn't return any of my letters since before Christmas."

Harry winced at Cho's worried look, "Sorry about that, there was a minor situation at my house and I couldn't return any owls."

"I heard about that," Cho nodded sympathetically, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Oh - good - for a second I thought you were avoiding me," Cho said evenly.

"Nope, not avoiding," Harry said in a clipped tone.

"Come on, Harry."

"Swear on it; not avoiding."

"So when you see me at the end of a hall, you just happen to have forgotten something in the opposite direction?"

"Coincidence, I think."

"Harry."

"Cho."

"Look, it's okay," she laid a hand on his shoulder, "I know when I'm being blown off."

Don't you dare try to guilt trip me.

"Look, sorry," Harry said through gritted teeth, "I've just been very busy lately."

"I know, I heard about the Defense thing. Sheppard's doing the same thing with every year but I heard you were one of the leaders in your army."

Harry nodded as she continued, "I think it's very brave of you to take on all the Slytherins like that. Good luck today."

"Thanks," Harry said, not quite leaving his suspicious shell yet, "You too on Monday, I guess."

"Thanks. I'll see you around then," Cho said in more of a command than a question.

"Just maybe you will," Harry said in false brightness.

As Cho excused herself and entered the owlery, Harry looked behind him to see she was completely gone before running away as fast as he could.

Girls. Crazy.

He entered the Defense classroom with a light sheen of perspiration, much to the amusement of Seamus and Dean.

"Hasn't started yet, Harry."

"Just building up my stamina."

"Dedication, my friends. This is your General!" Seamus bowed exaggeratedly to Harry.

"Get up before I kick you in the face, Seamus."

"I wouldn't be opposed to it," said Dean.

"I'm hurt," Seamus held a hand to his hurt heart.

"Yeah, you will be," Ron muttered as he walked by the group.

"Take this a little more seriously, Ron. Please," Seamus sarcastically replied. Ron flushed and flipped him the finger to which Seamus responded by giving him the traditional "suck it" sign.

"Hello class," Sheppard strolled in with an eerily bright smile on his face, "I hope all of you are sufficiently prepared for today. Let's waste no time, I'll show both armies to their starting locations."

Sheppard led Neville's army out first to their spot near the owlery courtyard. While Sheppard led them to their spot, Harry took this time as an opportunity to dress the entirety of his army for the first time.

"Alright guys," Harry stood on top of a chair so he could see everyone, "Just a couple of things I want to say before we start -"

Harry was interrupted by a snicker from the Slytherin section.

"-as I was saying, just a couple things. First, remember to try stay with Expelliarmus for a little while. It's easier to aim and not as draining as the Stupefy. If you can get their wand, it'll be a lot easier to stun them."

"Nott," Harry addressed the Slytherin contingent for the first time, "Can your guys hold down the Entrance Hall and the zones behind it?"

"Done," Nott replied with a mocking grin on his face.

"Good," Harry eyed them warily, "The rest of us will try to take the Great Hall. Feel free to support if you would like."

Nott gave no indication that the Slytherins would be doing any type of supporting.

"Remember, try to stay alive as long as possible. We all get bonuses for reaching the end of the class period alive. One last thing, cover

each other's backs. We won't be able to take them on one at a time; they have way more people than us."

"We can do this. Just keep your head about you."

Sheppard returned to escort them to the courtyards near the Divination tower. As Harry lead his group to their starting spot, he double checked to make sure the wand holster with the Unicorn hair was attached to his wrist. He did not know if Hermione would remember that she had given it to him, but he was counting on the holster as his secret weapon. They would not be able to disarm him easily as long as he had his holster.

"Remember all the safety rules," Sheppard said in a strict tone, "At the sound of the gong, you are free to go. The sound of two gongs indicates that this skirmish over. Good luck, folks."

Sheppard disappeared without another word as Harry turned to face his close group, "Everyone remember the plan?" everyone nodded.

"Nott, are you ready?"

Nott nodded, suddenly looking a bit more nervous than he did in the classroom.

"Good."

The students fell silent as they awaited for the loud gong to signal them. Harry could already feel the sweat perspiring throughout his body in anticipation of the fight. Though he knew that no one would actually be harmed during this skirmish, it held almost the same intensity of a real battle. Harry briefly flashed back to Godric's Hollow but tried to force that image out of his mind as quickly as possible.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry peeked at Malfoy and saw that the boy still held the same calm visage ever since he returned to Hogwarts. Harry could tell that Malfoy was a bit nervous though, from the stiffness of his posture and how tight he held his wand.

GONG.

The loud sound reverberated throughout the courtyard and the students immediately ran into the castle to capture their zones. Behind him, Harry could hear the Slytherins casting Expugno, but Harry could not turn around to confirm which zones they captured. He needed to reach the Great Hall quickly.

There were two entrances to the Great Hall. Harry's army was situated so they would reach the Great Hall from the double doors of the Entrance Hall. Neville's army, on the other hand, would reach the Great Hall through the backdoor the staff could use. Harry peeked around the corner to see a group of ten-plus already establishing a stronghold by flipping the tables over and using them as cover.

"Malfoy, you're with me. Stay behind me," Harry ordered. Malfoy nodded.

"You guys know what to do once we're across," Harry addressed the rest of his lieutenants, "Remember; we need them to be suppressed. Don't allow deep penetration."

"That's what she said," Seamus whispered.

"Indeed. Let's go, Malfoy."

Harry threw the hood of his cloak over his head and watched Malfoy do the same. Taking a deep breath, Harry immediately sprinted for the spare door which would lead to the other courtyard.

"Reducto! Reducto!"

Harry fired two spells to upend some of the tables near their fortified position. A series of shields were erected to stop any incoming fire. All the while, Harry kept sprinting towards the other door with Malfoy closely following behind him. Neville's forces in the Great Hall were still trying to situate themselves and were caught off guard by the sudden rush. Ron spotted Harry sprinting to the other door and immediately ordered a volley of Disarming charms his way.

"Expelliarmus!"

Ron saw one spell make contact with Harry, but the boy kept running as if nothing had hit him. By the time Ron gathered his wits,

Harry and the other person had already reached the other door and disappeared out of sight.

"Did Harry really just run through the Great Hall?" asked Ernie.

"I think he did," replied Terry Boot.

"Ron?" they asked of their leader in the Great Hall.

"He's going to try to surprise Neville and Hermione. They're not set up yet, we have to get them!" Ron made to stand from his crouched position behind a series of tables but was stopped by a volley of jinxes.

Unnoticed by Neville's army, Seamus and the rest of the group entered the Great Hall immediately after Harry made it to the other side of the Hall. While they were distracted, Seamus split up the group so Padma and Michael were in the opposite corners from Dean, Su Li, and himself.

"They came from over there!" yelled Ernie as he fired a blind Stunner in that direction.

"No, there were spells this way," Justin was trying to peek above the table but kept ducking down as jinxes skimmed over his head.

'Shit. Shit. Shit. They're trapping us," said Ron in a panicked voice, "Stay low! We can take them out one by one!"

Ron issued his order but looked towards the other door nervously. He had no way of warning Neville and Hermione that Harry was already heading their way.

"Go! Go! Set up the defenses! Once we get this done we can move everyone else to the Great Hall and hold it off permanently," Neville barked as he ordered his remaining army to raise a series of walls and hedges that would provide ample cover should anyone break through the Great Hall.

Neville ran to the zones near the far end of the courtyard as he helped some of the Hufflepuffs with some of the more complicated charms to build the proper defenses.



"Lavender, make sure to use Defodio to dig in those trenches. NO, I DON'T CARE IF YOU GET DIRTY!" Hermione yelled at her roommate as she issued orders from the middle of the courtyard.

"Parvati! Bem! Make sure those walls hold. One good Deprimo will bring it down and -"

Hermione did not finish her sentence as a Stunner raced in and hit her square in the back. Her face looked surprised as she collapsed to the ground. Lavender and Parvati looked at each other before immediately hitting the ground and falling into their makeshift trenches.

"NEVILLE! Hermione's down!" they yelled as they frantically looked around.

"What?" Neville said in confusion as he spotted Hermione's prone form in the middle of the courtyard.

Lavender and Parvati's announcement immediately sent the rest of the students in a frenzied panic. Various spells were shot in random directions as they tried to locate the origin of their attackers.

"Over there!" yelled one of the Hufflepuffs.

A blue Stunner immediately fired across the courtyard and hit Lavender in the head as she peeked out from the trenches. The Gryffindor girl hit the ground, much to Parvati's dismay.

"Again!"

Another Stunner came flying in across the courtyard and missed Neville by bare centimeters. Neville threw himself to the ground as he determined that the attackers were covering themselves behind the series of pillars that braced the outside of the courtyard.

"How many are there?" Neville barked.

"I can't tell, they're only popping up one at a time and they're all hooded," responded Anthony as he hid behind a quickly conjured hedge.

"Herbivicus!" Neville directed the jungle of plants so it would block the attacker's vision as he raced to the trenches with a couple of students.

"Incendio!"

One of the attackers lit a fire into the plants to rid of it, but Neville had already reached the trenches.

"Parvati, how many did you see? It's very important," Neville asked as he peeked above the trenches to locate the attackers. He saw nothing.

"I - I - I don't know. One second Hermione's being her usual self and the next second she's on the ground and Lavender's gone and -" Parvati started hyperventilating as she lost control.

"Shhh...it's okay," Neville hushed her as he worriedly look at the series of pillars. He barely avoided another Stunner as he saw a glimpse of one of the attackers.

"I think it's Harry," Neville addressed his small group, "Judging from the strength and accuracy of the Stunner, Harry's at least among the attackers."

"What about the Great Hall? How'd they break through so fast? Do you think Ron and the rest are already downed?" Anthony asked worriedly.

"Unlikely, we sent sixteen people over there. That's the entire size of their army," Neville grimly replied.

"Then how are they already through?" whispered a Hufflepuff.

"I don't know."

"Reducto!"

A patch of ground next to the trench blew up from the spell, causing Parvati to shriek.

"Parvati, be quiet," Neville snapped, "He's trying to get us to reveal our position. Everyone spread out and start taking pot shots at the pillars. We need to know how many of them there are."

The group fanned out in the series of trenches as instructed and started firing hexes and jinxes at the pillars. Neville took careful aim at one of the pillars and yelled, "Reducto!"

The pillar splintered apart but did not blow up completely. Neville was satisfied to see someone roll to avoid being hit from the curse, but could not see whether or not the figure was Harry. They still had their hoods tightly wrapped around their heads.

"Everyone!" Neville signaled, "Pick a pillar and hit it with your best Reducto."

A series of voices yelled the Reductor curse and caused chunks of the pillars to fly into the air. Neville did not fire a curse and instead watched as two bodies rolled to avoid the curses.

"There's only two?" Neville whispered in awe.

Seamus ducked to avoid a Tickling Charm that was sent his way as he sprinted for the double doors of the Entrance Hall. Dean was hit with a Stunner from Ron's crew, which left Su Li and Seamus at one corner and Padma and Michael in the other corner. They needed reinforcements badly as it was currently four versus sixteen. As Seamus rounded the double doors, he had to duck to avoid another Stunner, this time from the Slytherins.

"Merlin, Finnigan! At least give us a warning if you're coming back through here," chastised Nott.

The Slytherins were well set up in the Entrance Hall for anyone to come through the doors of the Great Hall. Seamus had to give them credit for that at least.

"We need your help," Seamus gasped out as he leaned over to put his hands on his knees, "Dean's down and we can't keep Ron pinned in the crossfire forever. If we don't hold them for a little while longer, they're going to get back to Harry."

"Where's Potter?" Blaise asked.

"He's on the other side," Seamus explained as he heard another series of Stunners splash against the doors behind him.

"He's in the other courtyard?" Nott asked in clear surprise.

"Yeah."

Nott looked at Seamus for a moment as if he were calculating something in his head before speaking, "Zabini. Goyle. Davis. Go with Finnigan."

"Thank you," Seamus said in earnest as he instructed the three Slytherins where they should set up.

"Finnigan, make sure you give a warning before you come through the doors again. I'll hit you next time if you don't," Nott warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Seamus said as he braced himself to reenter the fray.

Seamus and Goyle sprinted for Su Li's corner, making sure to use various tables as cover to avoid the jinxes sent from Ron's direction. Ron's group was set up in a covered circle near the center of the Great Hall. Seamus could see Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis leapfrog their way over to Padma's corner. As Seamus reached his previous locale, he found Su Li also Stunned on the ground.

"Looks like it's just you and me, Goyle," Seamus muttered as he aimed a Disarming charm at the flaming, red hair of Ron Weasley.

Goyle looked at him dumbly before casting a Lumos.

"Goyle! What are you doing!" Seamus yelled as he ducked to avoid a Stunner.

"Sorry."

Harry cursed as he tried to peek out over the low wall and saw another Expelliarmus fly over his head. By now, Neville had to know that there were no more than five people at the very most. Harry did his best to attack from various locations to keep them off guard, but time was quickly running out for him and Malfoy.

"Malfoy. Are you ready?" Harry whispered to him as they both lay flat on the ground.

Malfoy nodded in response, rolled over and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. As long as he stayed still, they would not see the slight shimmer of the Charm unless they were standing right on top of Malfoy.

Satisfied that Malfoy was well hidden, Harry immediately sprinted for the back door of the Great Hall. Along the way, he felt another Expelliarmus hit his shoulder. His wand flew out of his hand but was quickly yanked back by the Unicorn hair. Harry almost laughed at the irony of Hermione's gift.

Harry took one quick look back at Malfoy and could not see the Slytherin. He took this concealment as a good sign and raced back into the Great Hall. Peeking over the High Table, Harry could see that only two of Ron's crew were hit by Stunners. They were, however, pinned in their little shell as they exchanged fire in two different directions. Ron obviously did not anticipate being caught out so early.

Harry took a quick look back to make sure Neville had not followed him into the Great Hall yet before he tore off into a run straight for Ron. They had their backs turned to him as they exchanged fire with Seamus and the rest of the group. Harry conjured a ball of bright light and threw it in the middle of the huddled group to briefly disorient them.

"Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"

Harry hit them at point blank and did not push his luck past three Stunners as he sprinted away from the disoriented squad and back to the High Table. Harry smiled in satisfaction as he watched Ron's group yell in confusion and manage to stun one of their own.

"Did you see that?" Parvati asked Neville as she watched someone sprint back to the Great Hall.

"Yeah, I saw it," Neville said suspiciously as the air became suddenly quiet. There were no more spells from the attackers behind the pillars.

"You think they retreated?" Anthony asked.

"There was only one of them," Justin responded.

"Maybe we took out the other ones," Parvati suggested.

"Maybe," Neville said, not sounding too sure.

"Come on," Neville lifted himself from the trench and carefully made his way to the pillars, his wand trained for any sign of movement. Peeking behind the low wall, Neville could not see anyone there.

"They must have retreated," Neville concluded. He still felt as if he were not seeing the whole puzzle.

"We have to go," Anthony insisted, "Who knows what's going on in the Great Hall."

"Agreed," Neville concluded grimly, "Justin. Parvati. Stay behind him and make sure no one gets through the Great Hall. There's twenty-two of us in there, there's no way they can get around us. Everyone else, follow me."

Justin and Parvati nodded and set themselves into a position where they would blast anyone who exited through the back door of the Great Hall. Unbeknownst to them, Malfoy stood up and immediately dispatched them once Neville and the rest of his group disappeared into the Great Hall. Once Malfoy was satisfied that the two were stunned, he started a complex spell that would complete the plan.

Harry crouched behind a chair, Disillusioned as he waited for Neville. This move was the biggest gamble on Harry's part. He had to assume that Neville would follow him into the Great Hall once he concluded their courtyard was clear. If he did not follow Harry, the plan would fall to ruin.

A couple of spells whizzed over Harry's head but they were nowhere near on-target. Harry could hear footsteps approaching from the back door of the Great Hall. Harry barely could contain himself as he saw Neville and three other people take in the sight of the Great Hall.

Tables were flipped over everywhere. Spell marks scratched the ground and the walls of the Great Hall while a number of residue charms still lingered around. Padma's specialized Herbivicus charm slowed Ron's crew down considerably as they struggled to locate their targets from behind the overgrowth. As it were, Ron's crew were still pinned in the center of the Great Hall behind their circle of tables.

Harry watched as Neville's group cautiously made his way to Ron. Neville tapped the table to indicate he was a friendly and made some hand motions to his best friend. Harry watched the exchange and started to creep back towards the rear door of the Hall. Before he left the Great Hall, he carefully aimed two Stunners at Neville's huddled group. Though he aimed for Neville and Anthony, Harry's Stunner somehow missed Neville and hit another person instead. Neville turned around in surprise as Harry disappeared around the corner.

"No! No! Get them!" Neville yelled as he realized his oversight.

Sprinting as fast as he could, Harry spotted Malfoy finishing his spell at the back entrance of the Great Hall. Malfoy waved him over, indicating that he was almost finished. Harry sprinted through the ward just before a series of bricks whirled into view and trapped Neville's army in the Great Hall.

"That'll hold?" Harry checked his watch to see how much time remained in class.

Malfoy nodded, even looking slightly pleased at his handiwork.

"Good. Let's capture the rest of the zones before time goes up."

Harry and Malfoy raced around the empty rooms and cast their Expugno. There was no resistance since they had either taken out Neville's army in the courtyard or trapped them in the Great Hall. Harry checked his watch one more time to see there were only two minutes left before the second gong sounded.

He knelt down to Hermione to brush a stray hair away from her face, "Sorry, Hermione. Had to take you out first or else you would have made life much more difficult."

The double gong sounded to indicate that this skirmish was over. Harry's army had effectively captured nine out of the ten zones. The only zone they conceded was the important Great Hall. Unfortunately for Neville's army, they were going to be surrounded once the next skirmish started.

Neville's army - 33 points.

Harry's army - 67 points.



Sixty-seven to thirty-three.

Harry smiled as he exited the Defense classroom. The score was etched on top of the metallic board at the front of the room. On the metallic board, nine blue zones surrounded one singular red zone to represent the two warring armies. News of the giant upset spread through Hogwarts like wildfire. Harry found himself being congratulated by people he had barely seen during his tenure at Hogwarts. Students, older and younger, occasionally gave him a high five or a slap on the back as he passed them in the hallways. All in all, the past week had looked kindly upon Harry Potter. Of course, as with all things in life, there was a catch.

"Harry!"

Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.

"Hello Cho," Harry said as he turned around to address the pretty girl. She looked especially ravishing today; her hair done in little ringlets with a touch of eye shadow to complete the look.

"I heard how great you did last Friday," Cho gushed, "Looks like it's all because of my good luck."

"And I heard you did fantastic as well, great job," Harry responded cordially.

"Why thank you as well," Cho fake curtsied.

"So..." Harry rocked back and forth on his heels.

"So...I was thinking - tomorrow we could nick some food from the kitchens and have a celebratory lunch out by the lake. You know, just you and me," she suggested.

"That sounds..." Harry struggled to find an excuse.

"Well - I mean - if you want to that is," Cho fiddled with the hem of her robes and cast her eyes downwards.

"Who would not want to?" Harry rhetorically questioned.

"That's a yes then," Cho's face beamed.

"You set the time."

"Great, I'll owl you later about it," Cho bounced away without a proper goodbye.

Harry scratched his head, confused as to why he could defeat the Boy-Who-Lived but could not find a way to turn the best looking girl in her year down. Harry heard a giggle and saw Hermione leaning against a wall, holding her books to her chest.

"Out again with Cho are you?" Hermione said with a raised eyebrow.

"Looks like it. I'm so excited," Harry responded dryly as he approached Hermione and leaned against the same wall, "I thought I was the only one who eavesdrops on random conversations."

"I'm always looking to broaden my horizons."

"Is that so?" Harry asked with a waggle of his eyebrows. Hermione shook her head at him.

"So what's it going to be Harry? Do you like her or not?"

"I want to like her, but some things prevent me from doing so," Harry thought of her letters to Neville during the holidays.

"Like what things?"

She's not you.

"She has kind of a weird nose."

"Harry," Hermione admonished him, "She has a perfectly good nose. Don't go around insulting her like that."

"Alright, alright! I didn't know you were such a Cho-lover."

"Hardly," Hermione rolled her eyes, "She just goes hopping around to what ever guy suits her fancy."

"Oh so I don't get to be the guy who suits her fancy?"

"You can be. Just be careful. I don't want to see you getting hurt," Hermione reached out to off handedly fix his tie for him.

"Is it her hair? I still remember that conversation. Are you jealous of Cho's hair?" Harry teased.

"Please," Hermione scoffed, "I'm going to spend an hour on my hair just so you can see it for a total of thirty seconds. I am not jealous of her hair."

"Then what is it?"

"It's nothing!"

"Wait, Hermione Granger. Are you jealous of her because of - you know -" Harry pointed to himself as he continued to tease her mercilessly.

"Do not finish that sentence Harry Potter or else I'll shut your mouth faster than you can say Quidditch."

"Qui-"

"Shhh," Hermione shushed him by placing her finger on his lips, "Silence is golden."

"Hermione?" Neville called out as he turned the corner to find Hermione leaning towards Harry with her finger on his lips.

"Hello," she smiled at Neville and Ron. Harry smiled at them as well but was not surprised to see them respond negatively in kind.

"We need your help for some planning stuff," Ron said as he continued to fix Harry with a crazy eye.

"Always with the planning stuff," Hermione pushed herself off the wall, "If I would have known that this is what it takes to get you two to pay attention in class, I would have done it a long time ago."

"Well we can't all be Harry," Neville coolly said.

"And you shouldn't be. He's terribly indecisive and a chronic eavesdropper," Hermione winked at Harry as she grabbed Ron and

Neville by the crooks of their arms to lead them away, not wanting a confrontation to break out between her friends.

"See you later, Harry," she called out as she led the two boys away. Behind her back, Ron drew his thumb across his throat in a cutting motion. Harry responded with his trademark two finger salute.

Harry chuckled to himself as he made his way up the seven floors to the Gryffindor common room. Some first year asked for his autograph along the way; Harry amusedly complied by signing a set of his spare robes. Whistling "Harry Potter's fucking dynamite" to himself, Harry found himself on the seventh floor in no time. He bent down to tie his shoes for a second. As he stood, he was bewildered to find Luna standing in front of him once again.

"Luna!" Harry looked behind him and behind her, "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Just appear like that, you have to teach me that trick."

"For whatever reason?"

"You know, maybe I could use it during the next skirmish."

"Skirmish?"

"Yes," Harry looked at her confusedly, "You know the skirmishes each year is having, right? When's yours or did it already happen?"

"I think it happened. It'll happen again soon," she said breathlessly.

Just talking to myself aren't I?

"What are you doing up here all the time anyways, Luna?" Harry asked with a quizzical look on his face.

Luna immediately sobered and Harry could see her lip quivering, "Just working on something."

"Potions can't be that bad. I'll help you," Harry tried to cheer her up.

"I wish you could," she whispered.

"I can! I happen to be pretty good at potions," Harry boasted, "We can meet later if you'd like?"

"Thanks," Luna collected herself into that dreamy state again, "But I'll have to respectfully decline. The jumping jingles around your feet bid you a good supper."

Luna disappeared around the corner, much to Harry's continuing confusion.

"Jumping jingles around - who says that?"

"So what's the plan, Stan?" Seamus asked the next day.

The collective group were once again gathered in an abandoned classroom. Harry sat on the teacher's desk with his map in his hand while the rest of the group sat languidly in randomly scattered chairs around the room.

"I'm not Stan, Seamus."

"He's Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Defeated," Padma corrected.

"I kind of like the sound of that. Who came up with it?" Dean commented.

"Some second year."

"Really? That's -"

"Can we please get back on topic?" Harry interrupted.

"You're the boss," they simultaneously replied.

"Anyways," Harry tried to set some order to this meeting as he hopped off the desk, "We face a dilemma."

"No shit," spat Su Li.

Everyone looked at the usually quiet girl.

"I'm just trying to fit in," she looked quite embarrassed at her outburst, "Everyone else is being so macho around the hall."

"Don't ever do that again, Su Li. You're going to give me a heart attack," Seamus shook his head exaggeratedly.

"ANYWAYS," Harry raised his voice, "We have to figure out how we're going to contain their army within the hall."

"Well, that's pretty simple. Just split our army up in two and defend the two exits," Dean reasoned.

"Not that simple," Michael countered, "They could easily commit their forces to one side of the hall and overrun it."

"Touché."

"Do you think they'd risk doing that?" Harry asked.

"Well, they have to break out of there eventually. It might leave the Great Hall a little bit open, but they don't have a choice. They won't win if they stay in there," Padma concluded.

"So we attack them while they try to break free?" Su Li asked as she squinted at the zones on her map.

"They'll still outnumber us in the Great Hall," Michael sighed.

"Not necessarily," Harry bit his lip as a plan formulated itself in his head.

"Do I smell another great idea?" Seamus sniffed the air.

"Which side do you think they'd attack first?" Harry posed the question to everyone.

"The Slytherins," Dean answered confidently.

"Not necessarily," Padma tapped her nose thoughtfully, "They'd probably attack whichever side you're not on Harry."

"Padma makes a point," Michael agreed with his housemate.

"I will eventually get one of these right," Dean interjected.

"We all have faith in you," Seamus airily said as he tossed his toy Quaffle in the air.

"So what if we-" a double gong sounded, indicating the Third-year skirmish was over.

"Oh balls," Harry double checked his watch as he remembered his previous engagement, "We'll meet later, guys. I have somewhere to go."

"Where could you possibly be going, Harry? I thought this was important," Padma asked, a tad bit annoyed.

"I'm meeting someone. Can't blow it off," Harry apologized.

"Cho," Seamus and Dean said at the same time, topping it off with a fist bump.

"Sorry! Keep brainstorming!" Harry rushed out of the classroom.

"She's not that pretty. I don't see what all the fuss is about," Padma crossed her arms haughtily.

Seamus, Dean, and Michael looked at each other and shared amused grins.

Harry hustled down the grounds to find Cho already sitting underneath a tree with a blanket spread out underneath her. She was worriedly nibbling on a small piece of bread as she looked out to the sparkling lake. The weather was a bit on the chilly side, but the sun did much to alleviate the usual frostiness of this time of the year.

"Sorry about that, Cho, I was in the middle of something," Harry regained his breath as he took a seat next to the older girl.

"It's okay," she patted him on the thigh, "I haven't been here too long anyways."

"Mince pie, my favorite," Harry said cheekily as he took a bit out of one of them.

Cho laughed, tossing her hair back, "Glad you like it."

"How's your day been?" Harry asked.

"Going well, except Marietta insists in sitting in for these war meetings," she surrounded the word war with quotes.

"I know, people seem to be taking this way too seriously."

"I know!" Cho exclaimed, "I've never seen Marietta worked up about school. I think she wants to do well because Duncan is on our army and she's been trying to impress him for weeks."

"Duncan? Beater?" Harry asked as kept snatching food from the basket.

"Yeah, that Duncan. Except I think Duncan has a thing for Chambers and Chambers and Marietta don't quite get along."

"Mmhm."

"I don't know why though, Duncan's never been the type to go for blondes. I think Marietta just needs to let him go."

"Right."

"Besides, he can be a total jerk sometimes and he tends to take Quidditch way too seriously."

"Yeah."

Cho prattled on for the next five minutes as Harry continued to digest food and mumble one word responses. There was a combination of respect and disgust at how long she could simply talk to herself. Harry wondered if she ever felt bored with the amount of talking she could accomplish.

"-and so that's what I think about the whole situation with Michael Corner."

"What about Michael?" Harry genuinely asked.



"Harry! Haven't you been listening? I said that Michael's too hung up on Ginny."

"Well, I mean he has a right to, doesn't he? Ginny's a nice girl," Harry came to his friend's defense.

"I suppose you're right. I'm kind of jealous. I wish someone would like me that much," Cho leaned into him, her eyes hopeful.

"I suppose," Harry leaned back to avoid her.

Apparently, Cho took this move as an invitation for more. She laid her body sideways on top of Harry and looked down at him with a sweet look on her face. Harry was caught between trying not to crush the biscuit with his left hand and placing his right hand on her shoulder so she would not fall on the biscuit. All pretense of eating the biscuit left his mind as soon as she leaned down to kiss him.

Harry let go of the biscuit and melted into the kiss, circling his arms around her and pulling her more on top of him. It certainly did feel nice, the pressure of her body on top of his. His head move to and fro as he constantly adjusted to her pace of kissing.

So what if Neville's army attacks my side? Does that mean they'll try to take the zones that are - oh - that's tongue. What am I supposed to do with mine?

Harry awkwardly matched her tongue with his, not quite sure how this tango was supposed to work. Cho pressed down onto him as he was apparently succeeding in this task.

Do I put all the Slytherins on one side? They did say that they would probably attack the Slytherin side. Should I stay with the Slytherins? I've never seen Goyle even hit anyone with a Stunner. But I can't take Malfoy with me; they don't seem to like him and - oh - where are those hands going?

Cho's hands pulled at Harry's button down as she struggled to unstuck it from his pants. Harry shifted uncomfortably beneath her as he tried to make room for her hands. She laughed as he shifted and pressed down against him to continue kissing him.

I can take Neville on but where does that leave everyone else? I mean - oh that's my neck. That feels nice. It would be nice if we somehow kept them in the Great Hall though. Just have to make sure that Hermione doesn't try to - oh sod it all.

"Cho, Cho," Harry interrupted her necking as he tried to push her off. She looked a bit startled and sat up with worried eyes.

"What? Is there something wrong?" she asked.

"Cho, I can't do this," Harry sighed.

"Can't do what?" Cho raised her voice, looking quite upset at the mere thought of being rejected.

"This. I don't feel comfortable with it," Harry waved his arms around their space.

"We can take it slow if you really want," Cho said in a condescending tone.

"No," Harry growled, "I mean - I don't think I like you like that."

"You don't like me like that?" her voice was dead-panned.

"You send hot and cold signals, Cho. It's confusing."

"What are my cold signals? Please, tell me," Cho scoffed.

"I know you sent letters to Neville over the hols," Harry pointed out.

"Oh," Cho had the grace to blush at this revelation, "Well - well - I didn't know we were exclusive at that time!"

"We're not! It's just confusing to a bloke is all! Combination of all things leads me to not really want any of this," Harry pointed his finger between Cho and himself.

Cho huffed as she straightened her robes and stood up, "I didn't know you could become clingy so fast, Harry."

"I'm not clingy," Harry stated incredulously.

Cho had already stomped off in anger, making sure she got the last word in as she walked away, "CLINGY!"

"I'M NOT CLINGY!" Harry yelled back, much to the amusement of some of the surrounding students.

"Great," Harry grumbled as he collected his biscuit, "Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Was-Clingy."

Harry grumbled as he walked back to the castle, declining two offers for autographs along the way. Making sure to slam the portrait door behind him, Harry glared at some First-Year who came running up to him. The First-Year ran away. Harry spotted Seamus and Dean playing a game of chess near the fireplace.

"Meeting in 20 minutes. Round everyone up," Harry barked.

"Yes, sir," Seamus exaggeratedly saluted as he took in Harry's angry form.

Harry continued his stomping all the way up to his room, where Ron and Neville were thankfully absent. He did not think he could put up with their sulkiness at this very moment. It was not so much that Harry was angry over their abrupt break-up (he had no idea what type of relationship they were in anyways), Harry was instead quite upset she had the gall to him clingy. He had never been anyone's boyfriend, much less be clingy to a girl.

"Stupid owl, what do you want?" Harry muttered as he opened the window for the annoying offender. Harry turned the letter over to discover it was from his father.

Harry,

Glad to see you take the initiative and form your own army! Neville's a good kid, but it doesn't hurt to have a little competition, doesn't it? As for any advice, the best thing I can tell you is to look out for the person besides you. Make sure everyone knows what they need to do and help them out as best as you can. I know you're the strongest out of all them, Harry. Trust me on this. If anyone can lead them to victory, it's you, no matter how much of an advantage Neville's army has.

Neville, Hermione, and Ron are still a formidable force. Keep them off balance if you want to win and most importantly keep them apart. They function well enough as separate parts but can be dangerous when they click together. Do everything you can to separate them. I know you can take them on. Remember what I taught you about telegraphing your moves. You'll have a great advantage over the rest of your mates since you don't take as long to hit someone with a spell.

Above all else, do NOT underestimate them. They've gotten through scraps together for a reason. How's that Cho girl by the way?

Love, Dad.

P.S. Your mother sends her regards and is quite upset she didn't get a letter.

"Underestimate? Underestimate? I'm fucking Harry Potter," Harry growled as he tossed the letter on his bed and marched out of the room to meet the rest of his army.

The next skirmish was upon them quickly, with Harry in a brighter mood since they formulated their plan. Since Harry's army held a majority point advantage during their last skirmish, they had the opportunity to set up first without Neville's army seeing them.

As Sheppard led them to the zones they owned, Harry split the groups up; Crabbe, Goyle, and Su Li would occupy the Entrance Hall while everyone else would set up in the owlery courtyard. Su Li was instructed to stay back near the courtyard by the Divination tower in order to send the signal once the time arrived.

"Alright, Nott. Same plan as before. I'll leave Padma and Dean with you and I'll take Zabini, Bulstrode, and Greengrass with me. Padma's really good at the Herbivicus if anyone should get through though they really shouldn't. Once it's an all clear, leave two people behind and join us in the Great Hall," Harry instructed the Slytherin leader.

"Got it," Nott said as he distractedly counted the members who would stay behind with him.

"Everyone else set?" Harry asked the group that would lead the charge in the Great Hall, "Remember. We have to take them out quickly and set up the defenses so they can't get back in the Hall once they've discovered the sides are stacked."

Harry's plan hinged on Neville's army attacking the weaker side of Harry's surrounding forces. Since they would simply be overmatched if they attempted to keep them in the Great Hall, Harry's army would simply take the Great Hall and defend the double doors to the Entrance Hall, thus keeping Neville's army enclosed in one side.

GONG.

Harry immediately marched up to the backdoor of the Great Hall and yelled, "Bombardo!"

A cloud of dust and gravel flew into the air as Harry announced his presence. A few harmless jinxes flew through the cloud of dust, but Harry deflected them easily. Behind him, Padma and the rest of the Slytherins were working hard to build up the back defenses. Seamus and the rest of the attacking group stood at the ready for the signal.

"Signal's green!" Padma yelled out as she looked at the sky. Su Li would send green sparks if Neville took the "Goyle and Crabbe" bait and red sparks if he did not. The plan was working.

"Malfoy. Straight up the middle with me. Everyone else fan out," Harry barked as he pulled the hood over his head and checked his wand holster.

Harry stormed through the cloud of dust and immediately sent a Reducto at the table they had set up to block their move. The table flew backwards into the air, nearly taking out the student that was cowering behind it. Malfoy hit the student with a Stupefy to take him out.

Ron had predictably set up in the middle of the Great Hall with a similar shell fashion. Perhaps learning from the last skirmish, Ron had everyone at the ready for the attack. Harry ducked to avoid a telegraphed Stupefy as he and Malfoy quickly advanced to the shell group by zig zagging to avoid the spell fire. Seamus and Michael fanned out perfectly as they created a wide radius of attack for Ron's group.

As Harry ducked an amusing Bat-Bogey Hex, he counted only four students with Ron, all of them Hufflepuffs. Neville obviously committed most of his forces to the supposedly weaker Slytherin side. It would not take them long to capture all the zones on the other side of the Entrance Hall. Su Li's only job after her signal was to keep them distracted for as long as possible.

"Engorgio!"

Harry aimed the spell at the table in front of Ron and watched it swell to double its size, effectively blocking their view. Harry and Malfoy raced towards the shell before Ron could come up with the counter-curse. Once again producing a ball of bright light, Harry tossed it in the group to incite confusion. Harry was surprised to see the ball of light bounce right back out and momentarily blind them.

"Son of a - Stupefy!" Harry yelled as he tried to shield his eyes from the bright light.

Harry heard the distinct sound of a body falling as he recovered from his momentarily blindness. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry watched Malfoy systematically circle around the shell to avoid incoming and outgoing spell fire and continually stun the shell's inhabitants. In no time, Malfoy had stunned everyone inside.

"Job done, Malfoy. Quickly, set up," Harry started waving his wand and moving the tables so that it blocked off the Entrance Hall.

"Fortify the defenses! We can't have them blowing it up on a whim!" Harry ordered as he cast several Strengthening charms on the table to make sure it did not explode due to a simple Reductor charm.

"Harry, should I get the rest?" Seamus asked.

"No, not yet," Harry deviated from the original plan, "Wait until we hit the first wave and see what we're up against. There's seven of us here, so we should be able to hold it off."

Seamus nodded and continued his spell work to build defenses. Harry ran around and inspected any weak spots as he braced for the oncoming fight. At least they were defending the Great Hall through a narrow point. It would be much easier to fight them this

way. Once Harry was satisfied with the defenses, he crouched down on a raised platform to get a better vantage point on the entrance.

"Where are they?" Michael asked after a moment.

"Don't know," Harry muttered as he assessed the situation.

They should have attacked by now. Su Li can't hold them off for that long. It was only Ron and four Hufflepuffs here anyways.

Harry shifted his feet to avoid cramping and kept his eyes peered for any movement. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry spotted the prone and stupefied bodies of Ron and the four Hufflepuffs.

Wait. Four HUFFLEPUFFS?

Harry felt the wave of magic before he even heard the spell. Quickly jumping from the platform, Harry raised his strongest shield to help protect some of his army as he did a complete one hundred eighty degree turn, "PROTEGO MAXIMA!"

Almost ten Stunners hit the shield and skewed off in several directions. Harry did his best to block his group, but Michael fell to one of the stray Stunners. The group did a complete turn as they defended themselves from the assailants. Harry struggled to flip the tables over to create new defenses as he fought off jinx after jinx. Once or twice, an Expelliarmus hit him and caused his wand to fly out of his hand, thus disrupting his spells. Harry could still not see the attackers.

Disillusionment Charms.

Padma settled into her makeshift trench as she checked the spacing of the rest of her group. Though Nott was technically in charge, Harry left her the de facto leader should anything happen. She could tolerate Nott's priggishness long enough until Harry had cleared the Great Hall. Double checking her defenses, Padma gave the thumbs up to Nott to indicate they were all settled.

"What's taking Harry so long?" Dean asked from a nearby dig.

"Shouldn't Potter have cleared it out by now?" Pansy asked in an annoyed tone.

"Harry will give the go when he's ready," Padma replied in a clipped voice.

"Let me check the area trigger spells one more time," Dean leaped out of his foxhole to make sure the area triggers were working.

Before he could reach the area, however, a blue Stunner hit him square in the chest. Padma looked at Dean incredulously before she was forced to duck in order to avoid a rather potent Blasting curse.

"What the hell?" yelled Nott as he returned sporadic fire.

"Nott! Make sure to keep the spacing! Don't let them get around the plants. Parkinson, keep your fire concentrated and flush them to the area triggers!" Padma ordered as she struggled to keep her cool.

Nott ordered his fellow Slytherins to keep their spacing as he exchanged more wand fire. Pansy shrieked and fired blindly over the trenches, obviously caught out of her element. Padma aimed a Bombardo near the door to buy them some time.

"Pansy! Snap out of it," Padma shook the girl by her shoulders, "I need you to focus there."

Padma pointed out the target and after a moment, Pansy collected herself and shrugged the girl's hands off.

"I got it," she snapped as she started firing spells in a more controlled manner.

"Good," Padma grunted, "Where are you Harry?"

"Fuck it all."

Harry cursed as Bulstrode got hit by another Stunner. The situations had been reversed as Harry's group were now set up in a shell in the middle of the Great Hall. The Disillusioned attackers took them by surprise and Harry's group attempted to hop over the other side of their defenses to counter them. Unfortunately, the remaining attackers from the Entrance Hall descended upon them at the same



point. That left Harry's group back to back as they tried to fight off Neville's army.

"Harry! I still can't see them!" Seamus was simply firing back spells to nowhere.

"Homenum Revelio!" yelled Malfoy. Instantly, Harry saw Neville and the rest of his army taking cover from the High Table. The bastard had used Harry's own trick against him.

'Seamus! Zabini! Shift your fire to the Entrance Hall group. Malfoy! Greengrass! Focus your fire at the High Table," Harry ordered as he struggled to clear his head to formulate another plan. There was no Plan B to this situation.

They exchanged fire for a minute or so as Harry's group collected itself and started to push back the suppression. Harry shielded his face as a Reducto obliterated a chunk of the table's hardened defenses.

"Malfoy, bolster the defenses for a moment, I'll take over your fire!"

Malfoy nodded and started to wave his wand to raise a series of bricks that would absorb the spell fire for a moment. Harry took his spot on the wall and aimed a couple of Stunners at the High Table group. They were well fortified and equally spaced, making it difficult to pick out one target.

"Reducto! Bombardo!"

Harry attempted to destroy a part of their defenses but could only watch as his curses were deflected by various obstacles levitated in their way. Harry knew that was Hermione's handiwork.

"What the fuck happened, Potter?" Zabini yelled as a Cutting curse grazed his shoulder.

"Ron," Harry fired another Stunner, "Sacrificed himself to lure us into the Hall. Neville's army was just sitting in here, Disillusioned. Sacrifice the pawn; I always did lose to Ron at chess."

"Well you better figure out something quick," Greengrass said as she took a second to gather herself, "We can't hold here forever."

Harry peeked through a hole in the table to see Hermione and a couple of other people moving towards the backdoor of the Great Hall.

"Shit," Harry muttered, "They're cutting us off."

"Protego!"

Padma brought up a shield to stop a vicious Flipendo but could only block some of the curse's effects. Padma howled in pain as her body was hurled backwards into the trench. She felt her ankle tweak as she tried to stand up again.

"Patil, they're behind the pillars! They know about the area triggers. Someone keeps setting them off!" Pansy yelled in a panicked voice.

"It's stupid Granger," Padma growled as she finally hit someone with an Impedimenta. As she performed the necessary movements for another Stunner, someone had already cast a finite on the person and saved them from being hit.

"Graaaaaah," Padma yelled nonsense in frustration.

More fires were being lit around them as they systematically destroyed Padma's overgrowth. The plants could not shield them for long and it was only a matter of time before they started to advance on them. Luckily for Padma and Pansy, they had enough time to build deep trenches so they could systematically fall back until they hit the zones.

"Patil. Pansy. Keep them distracted; we're going to try something," Nott had rushed over from his spot in the trenches to inform them of his plan.

"What are you doing? We're supposed to hold it off!" Padma asked.

"Just keep them distracted," Nott said as he scampered away.

"Distraction," Pansy grumbled, "Might as well take off our shirts at this rate."

"That won't distract Granger," Padma said darkly.

"Aguamenti!"

Padma fired a stream of water high into the air in an attempt to at least confuse Hermione's group.

"Duro!"

The spell came from Hermione and Padma watched as the water immediately transfigured into rocks. The rocks came hurtling down in the trenches much to their dismay. Padma and Pansy shrieked as they hopped around to avoid the sudden boulder shower. Padma was unfortunately hit in the ankle again and groaned as she collapsed on the ground.

"Patil, get up! I can't hold them off by myself!" Pansy tried to pull the other girl to her feet.

"I'm trying," Padma said through gritted teeth.

Out of the corner of her eye, Padma watched as Nott hopped out of the trenches with two other female Slytherins and sprint towards the pillars. He showed considerable agility in avoiding some of the spells and surprised the contingent by hopping over the low wall and engaging them head on.

A bright flurry of spells lit up that side of the courtyard as Padma and Pansy were given a momentary reprieve from the endless spell fire. Padma watched in awe as Nott took down three other students before encountering Hermione. The two other Slytherins were already downed which left Nott by himself. There were a flash of lights as the duo engaged for approximately thirty seconds before Nott was flipped backwards into the air. He landed with a dull thud.

"Fall back Pansy," Padma whispered as she noticed they were the only ones left, "Just fall back."

"Stupefy!"

Harry finally made contact with someone as he watched the student fall with grim satisfaction. Their defenses were slowly being reduced and Harry was forced to lie backwards and sit up to fire a spell as the walls were getting lower and lower.

Keep them separated.

The advice rang in his head as Harry tried to formulate a plan. Hermione had left a little while ago to attack the courtyard. Did that mean the High Table defenses were weakened? Harry decided to test out his theory.

"Reducto!"

The spell splintered apart part of the defenses without encountering any obstacles. It was not enough to cause major damage, however, as Neville quickly repaired it. Harry then spotted the beams supporting the High Table as he lay on the ground.

"I have an idea," Harry whispered to the other four people.

"Charming," Seamus grunted as he rolled to avoid debris.

"Malfoy. Can you take out those support beams if we cover you?" Harry asked. Malfoy rolled onto his back and took a peek at said beams. He looked back at Harry and held up ten fingers.

"What's that mean? Ten seconds?"

Malfoy nodded.

"Okay," Harry sighed, "Ten seconds. You need ten seconds."

Harry lifted his head to see Neville rearranging their line, their spells coming at Harry in sporadic bursts. The distance from where they lay to the support beams was about twenty yards. Malfoy would need to get close enough to ensure the support beams were crushed. He could not destroy them from his position. Harry spotted an untouched table near the empty side of the Great Hall.

"Okay, listen up," Harry shimmied over so he could see Neville.

"Everyone focus their spells at the High Table. Malfoy, get there as quickly as possible and take it down. I'll distract them."

"You'll distract them?" Zabini asked incredulously.

"Yeah," Harry bit his lip, "Go on my mark."

"What'll be your mark?" questioned Greengrass.

Harry immediately leapt up from his prone position and sprinted towards the untouched table.

"He tends to do that," Seamus explained as he started firing Stunners at the High Table.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Malfoy sprint towards the High Table. Time seemed to slow down for Harry as he eyed the spare table at the other side of the Great Hall. He would never make it there unscathed.

Harry turned to assess the spell fire headed his way.

Reductor. Stupefy. Expelliarmus. Impedimenta.

Harry could see the four students telegraphing their spells as they aimed at him. Harry formulated a quick plan inside his head to counter the spells.

Summon the flag into the Reductor's way. Protego the Stunner. Absorb the Disarming charm. Roll to avoid the Impedimenta.

Only four tenths of a second had passed as Harry planned out his route to the empty table. Time seemed to catch up to Harry as he was pressed into action. Harry immediately summoned a nearby fallen flag to block the Reductor. Next, he threw up a shield to block the Stunner as he spun to avoid a stray jinx. Finally, Harry felt the Disarming charm hit him and the resulting force to jar his wand from his hands. Snatching the wand back quickly, Harry rolled to avoid the last spell as he skidded behind the table.

"Bombardo!"

Harry aimed at the support beam located at the corner of the High Table and watched it crumble. Malfoy did his job at the same time and Harry watched as the platform suddenly collapsed. There was a loud creak as the platform collapsed from the middle, the ground shuddering from the resulting rubble.

Harry leapt over the table and started Stunning all the disoriented students. He hit as many of them as he could while the rest of his group got into the action as well. As he made his way through the rubble, Harry spotted Neville and fired a Stunner his way. Harry watched in bewildered fascination as the spell actually bended out of the way.

Smarmy prick is using his magic to deflect curses now?

Neville threw up a shield as Harry hurled a Cutting curse his way. He did not mean to harm the boy, just distract him long enough to hold his attention. Harry and Neville exchanged spells, the resulting residue of the magic creating a shield around them.

"Stupefy!" they both yelled at the same time.

The spells knocked against each other and lifted the pair off their feet. There was a loud ringing in Harry's ears as he struggled to stand before firing another spell at Neville. It missed Neville yet again, but to Harry's surprise Neville did not fire back. Looking around, Harry saw that everyone had lowered their wands.

"Double gong sounded," Seamus said tiredly, leaning over to place his hands on his knees.

Harry's ears were still ringing as he nodded dumbly. He could, however, hear a distinct clapping from behind him. Turning around, Harry spotted Dumbledore applauding them amusedly.

"I've always wanted to obliterate the High Table," he said wistfully.

Neville's army - 67 points

Harry's army - 33 points

During the resulting chaos after Malfoy brought down the High Table, Seamus managed to keep his wits about him and capture the Great Hall flag. Unfortunately for Harry's army, Pansy and Padma had been overrun in a matter of minutes after they retreated. The roles were successfully reversed for the next skirmish.

"It's alright, Harry, we'll get them next time," Seamus clapped him on the back the next morning at breakfast.

"Didn't think it through," said Harry as he stabbed his meal, "Used my own trick against me."

"It was clever," Dean said.

"Too overconfident," Harry concluded, "Didn't see all the angles."

"You can't always do everything," Seamus tried to reason with him, "We'll get them next time; don't beat yourself up over it."

Harry still glumly sat over his breakfast, replaying the skirmish in his head. There were so many flaws to his plan that Harry began to feel disgusted. He was about to excuse himself from the table, but an owl dropped the Daily Prophet in his lap. Harry did not particularly care to read the whole paper but took a peek at the headline anyways.

Break-In at the Department of Mysteries!

The article went on to detail an apparent break-in at the Department of Mysteries. Details were kept to a minimum for security reasons, but they revealed that nothing was apparently taken.

"What do you reckon that's about?" Dean asked.

Harry looked up to see Neville, Hermione, and Ron huddled over the Prophet, "Don't know Dean. I gotta go though, see you in class."

Harry walked away, still puzzled over the meaning of You-Know-Who's attack.

"Excellent, Rookwood," Voldemort hissed as he sat in his chair.

"As for you, Avada Kedavra," Voldemort killed yet another Death Eater who had failed to secure the perimeter during their raid of the Ministry.

"Everyone else out," Voldemort ordered without raising his voice, "Bella, stay."

The Death Eaters filed out quickly, not wanting to be on the ends of another Killing curse.

"Any progress from our person in Hogwarts?" Voldemort asked as he toyed with his wand.

"We're about a week away, my Lord," Bella informed him.

"Excellent."

"My Lord," Bella paused as she gauged his reaction, "Permission to speak freely."

Voldemort waved his pale hand to indicate a yes.

"Though I feel their punishment is appropriate, the others are growing restless from our in-house execution," Bella said slowly.

"I know," Voldemort simply replied.

"I just wished to inform you of that."

"Dully noted, Bella, but it won't matter soon," Voldemort smiled.

"It won't?"

"Now that I know the Prophecy, it has become clear to me what must happen once we extract the object from Hogwarts," Voldemort explained.

"I see," Bella said, not quite understanding her master's plans.

"All in due time," Voldemort said as he read his most trusted advisor's mind, "All in due time."



Harry was currently restraining Dean Thomas with one arm, pointing his wand at a furious Ron Weasley with his other arm, and using one leg to make sure Michael Corner did not do anything particularly rash. Unfortunately, his one spare limb was being used to keep himself slightly upright, else Harry would probably have used it to prevent a war from erupting within the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

Neville and Nott were standing toe to toe to Harry's left. Nott was explaining several things he would do to Neville's non-existent girlfriend while Neville explained that the substance inside Nott's cranium would most definitely lose a battle of wits against a garden gnome. Padma and Parvati were nose to nose to Harry's right; both twins took turns explaining how one held a quality the other did not possess. Seamus seemed to be egging them on while gesticulating to Hermione that he did not care if she thought he was sexist. Other little skirmishes were erupting inside the classroom as Neville and Harry's armies engaged in a battle of words that would have turned to more had Professor Sheppard not intervened.

"ENOUGH!"

Ten Minutes Earlier...

Harry rushed down the moving staircase, leaping across a small gap as he tried not to be late to Defense. A late morning and another encounter with Luna Lovegood left Harry with only a minute to reach the Defense classroom from the seventh floor. Running through two turtle-paced First Years, Harry finally yanked the door open and stumbled into the room. A bemused Hermione looked up at him as he tried to catch his breath. Harry gave her a thumbs up as he noticed that Professor Sheppard was mysteriously absent.

Taking his seat next to Seamus (the class was still divided down the middle), Harry took out the necessary materials needed to take notes before he noticed no one had their quills and parchments out. It seemed as if the entire classroom had finally noticed something at the front of the room. Harry squinted his eyes and adjusted his glasses as he tried to read the scrawl near 'Potter's Army.'

Death Eater Army

Someone had scratched out Potter and replaced it with a rather insidious set of words. Harry's hands turned into fists as he turned to glare accusingly at the other side of the classroom. Thankfully, Hermione seemed appalled at the words etched onto the board. The rest of the group, however, shifted uncomfortably as they exchanged slight glances. Harry's eyes darted back and forth between the mixed expressions as he struggled to maintain his cool.

"What the fuck?" Seamus spit as he stood up.

"I'm not no damn Death Eater," Dean's dreadlocks flew wildly as he vigorously shook his head.

"Can't say the same for everyone though," Ernie MacMillan replied mockingly.

"Fuck you, MacMillan. Why don't you go back to shoving your head up your own arse?"

"Enough," Neville spoke out and gave Ernie a stern glare.

"You would defend him, wouldn't you, Longbottom?" Nott rhetorically asked.

"Neville had nothing to do with this," Hermione interrupted as she stood up as well.

"Oh shut up and stop defending your boyfriend, you stupid mudblood," Pansy snarled.

"Everyone just stop it!" Harry took a step to the middle of the classroom to place himself directly in the line of fire.

"I thought you were our General, Potter? What? Standing up for those stupid Gryffindors again?" Nott pointed an accusing finger at him.

"I'm not standing up for anyone," Harry glared at Nott before turning to Neville, "Neville, can we speak in private?"

"Private?" Dean cried, "We all want to know who did this, Harry! It obviously wasn't us!"

"Watch what you're saying, Thomas," Neville growled.

"Oh it's Thomas now is it? Do you forget we've been mates since we were eleven?"

"Wouldn't know by which side you chose," Ron rose to defend his best friend.

"There are no sides -"

"Ginny always said you were a right jerk," Michael interrupted Hermione's tirade with his own.

"Leave my sister out of this," Ron took a step to the Ravenclaw boy as he brandished his wand.

As soon as Ron took out his wand, everyone else took this motion as a signal to draw their wands as well. In a matter of seconds, wands were being pointed at each other as various people tried in vain to yell over each other. Harry was doing his best to restrain his side of the classroom as they begun taunting and egging each other on. It seemed as if the previous battle brought the previously tame rivalry to a new level. While there were traditional battles occurring, such as Gryffindors versus Slytherins, other inter and intrahouse fights were occurring all over the classroom. Harry was indeed upset by whoever scrawled the words onto the board, but he needed to keep the situation private for everyone's sake. Fortunately for Harry, a deep voice bellowed over the various yells of the students.

"ENOUGH!"

Professor Sheppard conjured bright red sparks into the air as he captured the attention of the angry herd. His thin, bony body did not look its part as he towered over his charges. His jaw was set in a hard line as he made sure to give each student his best disappointed stare.

"Everyone, sit," he barely whispered.

The students immediately complied, resuming their former sedentary positions. Though tensions still ran high amongst the two armies, neither would show it in front of the former Auror. Sheppard

took one look at the board and immediately erased the word 'Death Eater.'

"Detention for next Hogsmeade weekend. All of you," he informed them with his back turn.

The groans were only slightly snuffed as Sheppard brought down the punishment. They all knew the consequences of infighting outside of the regular skirmishes though Harry did note that since they were in class, they were technically free to fight. He did not dare voice the fallacy aloud. Sheppard still had his back to the class as he collected himself for an arduously long lecture.

"I have to admit that I knew this was a possibility when I assigned this project," Sheppard started as he turned to face his students.

"For as long as I have known, the House rivalries have always run incredibly deep in Hogwarts. I, myself, as a Hufflepuff, am embarrassed to admit I competed heavily in winning the House cup. I sought to break down these barriers. Mr. Potter, you made things quite easier by appointing yourself as leader and decisively alienating yourself from your peers. It would have been quite easy for you to join Mr. Longbottom," Sheppard looked at Harry appraisingly.

"Mr. Potter presented me the opportunity to observe different houses fighting as one. Disappointedly enough, there was not a single Hufflepuff to join Mr. Potter's army," Sheppard paced over to the other side of the classroom to give the Hufflepuffs a disappointed glance.

"Hufflepuffs are loyal to a fault. But sometimes this loyalty is too evident. I expected most of you to join Mr. Longbottom. How could you not? This war has driven deep divisions amongst wizards and witches. But not one of you joined Mr. Potter. Unity and loyalty are honorable traits. It is also this same trait that Voldemort has used to wrap the Death Eaters in his hands," Harry and other students flinched as Sheppard spoke his name. The Hufflepuffs immediately looked shocked at such an accusation.

"Besides the obvious, what I had hoped for all of you to learn is that your Houses will mean nothing if you can't band together and fight

as one. Mr. Potter, who would you say is your right hand man on the battlefield?" Sheppard singled the boy out.

"Um - uh," Harry stuttered as his eyes bounced through his army. He found himself moving through his group as he struggled to find the right answer. Much to Harry's chagrin, he found himself staring at Malfoy. Though he had not consciously acknowledged it, Harry always ordered Malfoy to follow him through the previous two battles. Surprisingly enough, even to Harry, Malfoy had performed admirably throughout the process with little resistance.

"It is Mr. Malfoy, is it not? Who would have imagined Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy storming through battle when this class started? Certainly not you, Mr. Potter?" Harry shook his head slowly as eyed the Slytherin boy. Malfoy did not even acknowledge he had heard the Professor. Harry recalled that Malfoy did not even stand up to defend himself in the previous ruckus before the Professor arrived.

"Yet all of you look down upon this arrangement," Sheppard turned to face Neville's contingent, "Am I safe to assume that someone from this group wrote that on my board?"

The group stirred nervously, neither one wanting to rat out the other. Neville hesitantly raised his hand and said, "Sir, I don't think anyone from this group did it."

"As admirable as that is, Mr. Longbottom, it's complete illogical for someone in Harry's army to scrawl that on the board. Do not worry, I will not ask for whoever wrote it to reveal themselves. I am only saying this to point out the fact that the prejudices run too deep in Hogwarts. Mr. Potter is working with the Slytherins to fight against you and as a result, someone has cast him among the preconceived notions that all Slytherins are Death Eaters," Sheppard now turned to face the Slytherins.

"To be fair, none of you did anything to dispel this notion. None of you joined Mr. Longbottom, none of you made any effort to mask your displeasure when you realized that Mr. Potter would be the other leader, and none of you stood up to take the mantle of leadership. I believe in all of you. I believe that you will not follow the footsteps of previous Slytherins. Are you not supposed to be the most cunning? The most ambitious? Do not make the same mistake as your elders. You can all be great and none of you should fear the

wrath of a maniac hell bent on terrorizing the world," Sheppard warned them solemnly. The Slytherins looked uncertain on how to react as the Professor simultaneously insulted and praised them. Nott settled on a generally angry stance, his fists furiously clenching and unclenching.

"Professor?" Hermione raised her hand hesitantly, "You ask for us to unite together yet point out that unity is the same thing Voldemort uses to intimidate us all. How can we be expected to follow your advice?"

"You are as perceptive as your peers think you are, Ms. Granger. The marked difference between all of you and Voldemort is you are fighting for different things. If all of you unite to fight against Voldemort, you will be doing it for that singular cause. There will still be divisions among you. There will still be infighting. But you will realize that you can overcome these differences to rid the world of a terror," Sheppard pointed out.

"Why do the Death Eaters and all their creatures fight for Voldemort? For a blood cause? The wizarding world is a decaying breed," Sheppard slammed his fist down on the table, "There are less and less Purebloods every year. We can not expect to live without Muggle influence forever. Make no mistake, even Purebloods such as yourself, Mr. Weasley, are guilty of this error."

Ron protested indignantly but Sheppard cut him off, "Do you not scorn Muggles? Do you not look down on their ways? Do you not make fun of them as you pass them by on the streets? The prejudices run deep throughout all of the wizarding world."

"So do the Death Eaters fight for a blood cause?" Sheppard continued, "No. They fight because Voldemort tells them too. They run and chase because Voldemort orders it. They kill in the name of Voldemort and they will die in his name as well. This is the difference between yourselves and the Death Eaters."

"You fight for one another. They fight for one person. Human kind has made this mistake repeatedly. Wars have been raised all for the sake of one person, one leader. Do not be so foolish to make this same mistake."

The bell rung, abruptly breaking the hold that Professor Sheppard had placed upon the students. As the class shook out of it's stupor, Sheppard did well to remind them, "Remember. Detention for all of you this upcoming weekend."

Luna Lovegood paced in front of a rather large cabinet. It was not in her nature to pace. It was not even in her nature to show any sort of nervousness. Yet, Luna continued to pace nervously as her eyes remained glued to the cabinet. There was a small sound from within the cabinet, causing Luna to freeze on the spot. Slowly, she reached one pale hand to wrench the door open. Inside, a white songbird fluttered about, looking quite unharmed. Luna's eyes widened as she gently picked up the bird, making sure not to harm it in any way. The bird hooted softly as it took in its surroundings.

"Please hold on, Father," Luna whispered as she let the bird free.

Luna exited the room, making sure no one could see her as she left. For one reason or another, Harry Potter always seemed to be wandering this particular corridor. Luckily for Luna, there was no one outside of the room. Hurriedly making her way to the owlery, she found the particular owl she had been using to communicate with the others. Pulling out a piece of parchment, she quickly scrawled a few words with a spare quill. Tying the letter to the bird, Luna forced it into the sky.

It is ready.

Harry took his time to make his way back to the Gryffindor common room. He was too busy mulling over Professor Sheppard's speech. He had never known the older Auror to be particularly passionate about anything. Sheppard almost always stuck to his job as a teacher with strict authority. He taught the class and prepared them for the duel ahead and was not one to hand out life advice. His words, however, had a profound effect on Harry.

Was it wrong for him to think poorly of the Slytherins even though he had fought with them? Was it wrong for Harry to think poorly of the Hufflepuffs? Harry always dismissed them as a passive, dimwitted bunch. Yet, it was Professor Sheppard who had delivered this impassioned speech. It was Cedric Diggory who the Goblet had

originally selected to be the Hogwarts champion. Harry still had to consider his own Gryffindors. Though they were loyal, they were also brave and fierce in their convictions. Harry knew as well as anyone how quickly they could turn on even their own if the group felt threatened. Then there were the Ravenclaws; the coldly calculating breed of all of Hogwarts. Had they selected Neville's army because they believed they had the best chance of winning with him? What would stop them from joining You-Know-Who if they determined he had a better chance of winning this war?

All of these questions ran through Harry's head as he distractedly arrived at his room. Flopping tiredly on his bed, Harry ran his hands through his hair as he tried to clear his head of the myriad of questions. The sun was setting in the distance, casting half of Harry in its shadow as the boy shielded his eyes. Taking off his glasses, Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly as he stared at the orange ceiling of his room. All of a sudden, there was a muffled voice from Harry's bedside. Rolling over, Harry looked over the side of his bed to find his just his bag. Scratching his head confusedly, Harry continued to listen for any sounds.

"....HARRY POTTER!"

The yell was still muffled as Harry finally put the pieces of the puzzle together. Underneath his bag was the mirror he had given to Ginny. Picking it up, Harry was elated to see Ginny's angry face in the reflection.

"Ginny! You're using it!"

"No thanks to you. You almost didn't answer!" she grumbled but with a smile.

"How are you? Are you okay? What are you doing?" Harry rushed out all of his questions as he took in her appearance.

For fighting a war, she looked relatively kempt. There were dirt marks around her cheeks and a slight cut above her left eye, but all in all, it was not any worse than the aftermath of a particularly brutal Quidditch match.



"I'm alright. They mostly have me doing healer stuff and taking care of the other soldiers. Fudge is still a bastard who deserves -" Ginny went on to explain several ways to dismember the Minister of Magic.

"Ginny," Harry interrupted, "Please stop."

"Sorry," she laughed, "But it hasn't been as bad as I thought it would."

"That's good."

"Mostly because they keep me away from the battles. Almost all of it's underground, did you know that?"

"Underground?"

"I reckon they think it's easier to hide from the Muggles that way. Occasionally we'll have something happen up above, but it's rare. Even the Death Eaters don't like going up there. They're like vampires, not that we've fought any here," Ginny shrugged.

"No vampires then? That's good," Harry nodded.

"No vampires but almost everything else. Giants, trolls, werewolves, even some evil garden gnomes," Ginny shook her head, "We'd outnumber them if it was just Death Eaters but all the Death Eaters do is direct those blasted things around."

"That sounds awful," Harry replied sympathetically.

"Thanks. Enough of me though. How is everyone?" Ginny asked eagerly.

Harry spent the next couple of minutes explaining the situation since Ginny left for the War. Ginny responded appropriately to all of his stories but frowned when he explained his cooperation with the Slytherins.

"Really, Harry? I know Malfoy's been through a lot but it's getting to be too much," Ginny admonished him.

"It's not that bad," Harry remembered Sheppard's monologue, "Maybe it's for the better."

Ginny looked at him in surprise but decided to let the topic drop, "Anyways, thanks for answering. I wasn't sure this was going to work. It's been a quiet day around here, for some reason all the Death Eaters seemed to have pulled back a bit. Not that I'm complaining too much."

"Think they're up to something?" Harry wondered.

"Maybe, maybe not. Maybe they're just tired. It's tiresome down here, I'm getting so pale," Ginny frowned.

"You would be worried about that," Harry replied dryly.

"You have to hold on to the little things, Harry. Else you'll go mad like Wonky Willy," Ginny nodded solemnly.

"Who's Wonky Willy?"

"You don't want to know."

"Weasley! Banco needs help reapplying the defenses," Harry heard a voice but did not see a face pop into frame.

"Yes, sir! Sorry, Harry, I need to go. Tell everyone I said hello. Owl my parents and tell the how much I love them, we can't owl much down here. Please take care and don't go flirting with Malfoy anymore!" Ginny rushed out as she vanished from sight.

"Bye, Ginny," Harry chuckled as he stowed the mirror into his bag.

Leaping up from the bed and onto his desk, Harry pulled out several pieces of parchment as he delegated himself to writing a couple of letters. Harry dipped his quill in the bottle of ink and started scratching out a letter to his mother.

Mother,

I'm sorry I didn't write to you before the first skirmish. I thought it'd be more helpful to write to Dad first since he's been doing this sort of thing. At least I think he has? What does he do anyways? Never mind, it's not like you're going to tell me. I hope you're enjoying the earrings I got you, they cost me a fortune! Of your own money! The

blasted things. My first skirmish went very well. Second one. Not so much.

Anyways, enough of the boring stuff. Did you know Professor Sheppard during your time at Hogwarts? I know he might be older than you (shocker for your age!) but he talked about some things that got me thinking. Were House rivalries always really bad? I'm kind of starting to rethink it. We're not all too different when we think about it. Sure we have some more prominent qualities, but we were all the same students when we got here.

It's just...he was talking about overcoming differences and I know how you and Dad have fought in the past and I know it isn't any of my business, but I love you both. I hate seeing you two fight and it makes me happy when we're all together. I know me saying this can't change anything between you, but I just hoped that I could somehow guilt you into maybe thinking about it. For me? I'll cook? I'll help us find our new house? Write back, Mum. I miss you and I love you.

Your dashing handsome son,

Harry

Harry smiled as he rolled the parchment into a letter. He took out a couple more pieces of parchment and started writing to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Ron should thank me for all the work I do for his sister.

Harry made his way down to the Great Hall where the Fifth years would all be serving detention. Some poor Second Year had filled the Defense room with an unidentified obnoxious gas, so Sheppard took pity for his Fifth year class and allowed them to have detention in the Great Hall. The rest of the upper classmen were in Hogsmeade while all the First and Second years were at the Quidditch pitch, participating in a rather amusing pick-up game. The Fifth years were the only students in the Hogwarts castle for now. As he passed by a classroom, he noticed the door was slightly ajar and that there were noises coming from within. Prying the door open slightly, Harry could see Hermione practicing various spells.

"Shorten your movements, you'll be able to take out more of the targets that way," Harry spoke up as Hermione attempted to stun several target dummies in a short amount of time.

"Harry!" she gasped before chuckling, "You surprised me. I just thought I'd get in some work before detention."

"You would," Harry said as he took off his robes and rolled up his sleeves, "Come on, I'll show you. My Dad taught me."

"You don't need to go through all the wand waving for the Stunner. As long as you focus on the effects of the spell and channel your magic, you can do it quickly. Watch."

Harry snapped his wrist three times and hit three target dummies with astonishing pace and accuracy.

"Incredible," Hermione exhaled, much to Harry's delight.

"So, for now, just focus on disarming me. Don't go through all the steps, just focus on it," Harry raised his arms sideways to indicate she should hex him.

"This doesn't sound very elementary."

"Can't trust everything they teach here. Increase your knowledge, Granger," Harry said with a wink.

"Here goes nothing. Expelliarmus!" Hermione's movement was certainly shorter on her first try. Harry's wand was pulled out of his hand but stopped in mid-air. Harry smiled as he plucked the Unicorn string. He had started to habitually wear the wand holster ever since the project was assigned to them.

"I knew that's how you were avoiding them," Hermione clapped a hand to her forehead, "I told them to stop using Expelliarmus on you but the idiots wouldn't listen."

"I must say, this has come rather handy."

"Quiet, you."

Harry laughed as he urged her to disarm him again. The movement became shorter again, but she was still trying too hard to go through the fundamental steps. Hermione's strict learning was stumping her from increasing her power.

"Here," Harry stood next to her and took her wrist in his hand, "You don't need to go through the loop or the overhand. Just give it a tiny flick of your wrist."

Harry suddenly took a deep breathe as he realized he was practically holding Hermione in his arms. He had taken his right arm and placed it on her right shoulder to keep her shoulder down during the spell. His left hand was showing her how to flick the wrist. Although he intended to just show her how to decrease her movement, he found himself frozen as he incidentally wrapped Hermione in a bear hug.

"Harry?" she turned to look at him with big, questioning eyes.

"Um," Harry took a step back and sheepishly shook his head, "Yeah, don't you think we should go? We're going to be late to detention."

"We have five minutes. Let me try one more time."

"Alright, fine," Harry was still flustered at how close he had been to Hermione, "One time."

Hermione performed the charm marvelously this last time, barely flicking her wrist as she disarmed Harry. She gave a very un-Hermione whoop as she crossed the distance between them and hugged Harry tightly.

"I've been trying to do that forever. Thank you so much, Harry!" she was obviously excited that she learned this new tactic so quickly.

"Right then. Detention we go," Harry said with an amused grin.

"Detention," Hermione said brightly, well aware the class wide punishment did not particularly effect her grades.

As they arrived in the Great Hall, Harry was pleased to see there was no divide amongst the two armies. It seemed as if Professor Sheppard's speech had done some good after all. Though the class

still sat in groups that clumped towards their respective house, the divide was much less clear.

"Guys," Harry nodded as he sat between Neville and Seamus.

"Harry," Neville said benignly. Harry looked questioning at Seamus, who simply shrugged in return. It was another fight swept under the rug for the Gryffindor boys.

"Welcome class," Sheppard announced, "Since all the teachers are either at the pitch or in Hogsmeade, I've been left in charge of Hogwarts."

Dumbledore had left after the story about the break-in at the Ministry. Harry assumed that the powerful wizard needed to address some urgent topics which required him to leave the school.

"And since I'm in charge, it looks like we'll all be cleaning the Great Hall," he paused for dramatic effect, "The Muggle way."

Every student groaned as Sheppard waved his wand and summoned buckets, mops, and other assorted cleaning material. Picking up a rag, Harry muttered to Hermione, "Race you to the end of the table."

Though they were forced to clean the tables the Muggle way, the students seemed to enjoy the process since they were forced to all do it together. Harry jokingly splashed Hermione with some water. The girl looked at Harry with surprised eyes before throwing a rag cloth at him.

"Mr. Potter. Ms. Granger. Keep it to yourselves," Sheppard droned as he watched them from the reconstructed High Table. They both had the decency to blush as they reapplied themselves to cleaning the tables.

Unknown to everyone, on the seventh floor of Hogwarts, Luna Lovegood opened the door to the Room of Requirement.

Luna closed the door behind her and made her way to the Vanishing Cabinet. Almost hyperventilating, Luna tentatively reached a hand out and opened the cabinet door. Shrieking in surprise, she stumbled back as a tall, pale creature emerged from the cabinet.

Gruesomely grotesque, the black robed figure inhaled deeply as he inspected the Room of Requirement. Behind him, dozens and dozens of Death Eaters poured out of the closet. It was a never-ending stream of bodies as more dark-robed Death Eaters arrived within the walls of Hogwarts.

"Bella, remind me to thank Borgin for modifying the closet. We need everyone here for this," Voldemort hissed.

"What of the girl?" Lucius Malfoy asked.

"Collect her later. We need to establish the perimeter and I need to change the runes for the castle to make sure Dumbledore doesn't get back in. Move," Voldemort ordered. Luna fainted as Voldemort and the other Death Eaters exited the Room of Requirement.

Harry hummed "Weasley is Our King" with the other Gryffindor students as he mopped a particularly troublesome spot near the corner of the Great Hall. He was content in trying to squeeze out this dirty spot when a slight wave of magical power passed over him. The hairs on the back of his neck were raised as Harry suddenly snapped his head up. He saw Neville do the same and look at him concernedly.

"What was that?" Neville asked.

"What was what?" Ron asked, still humming "Weasley is Our King."

"Professor Sheppard?" Harry called out. The Professor was standing alertly, his wand clutched in his hand.

"Everyone," Sheppard's voice rang through the Great Hall, "Stop what you're doing and gather on me."

The students looked at each other in confusion as they dropped their mops and rag cloths. Harry pulled out his wand, Sheppard's own nervousness compounding his own. As Harry pulled out his wand, Seamus pulled out his wand as well and made a hand motion to Dean. One by one, Harry's army brandished their wands in a quick game of follow the leader. Neville's army followed suit quickly thereafter.

"Something's happened," Sheppard said grimly, his eyes darting about, "We need to get out of the castle."

Neville immediately started power walking to the double doors of the Entrance Hall. As he was about to round the corner, a red light flashed in front of him and stopped him in his tracks. Neville stopped, immediately turned around and bellowed, "DEATH EATERS!"

The students immediately started firing at the double doors of the Great Hall even though none of the Death Eaters had even turned the corner.

"No," Sheppard whispered as he used a powerful charm to wedge all of the tables in front of the doors, "We can't fight them, they're too powerful. We have to get out of here."

"We can't," Hermione said in a panicked voice, "They're blocking the Main Entrance."

"We go around," Harry explained, "Take the other courtyard up the stairs and come from behind them to leave."

"Good, Mr. Potter. Everyone, move NOW!"

Neville lead the group through the back door of the Great Hall. They were going to take the back set of stairs that intersected the Second Floor. Once at the Second Floor, they would hopefully circle behind the Death Eaters and attempt their escape.

"Go, Potter. I'll catch up to you," Sheppard continued his warding of the entrance to the Great Hall as Harry lingered behind. Harry needed no other word as he sprinted towards the rest of the group.

"Where is everyone?" Padma gasped as they ran through the courtyard.

"Everyone's at Hogsmeade or at the Pitch. We're the only ones here," Hermione said worriedly.

The group of forty students stumbled through the hall and scattered up the staircase to the Second floor. Neville lead the group as they were about to turn the pivotal corner into the main corridor of the Second floor. Neville signaled for everyone to stop and hush as he



peeked around the corner. After a moment, Neville gave a thumbs up and the students quickly turned the corner, silent as they could possibly be. The Death Eaters would no doubt hear the steady drumming of the footsteps but not until they were very close. As they arrived at the staircase, however, Neville suddenly stopped.

"Neville," Ron hissed, anxious to keep moving.

Neville stopped and shook his head as if to clear his mind. Harry caught up with the front of the group to see what stopped Neville. A group of almost thirty Death Eaters were amassed in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts. Slowly, one of the robed figures turned around and Harry caught his first glimpse of You-Know-Who's torturous red eyes.

"Neville Longbottom," hissed Voldemort.

The other Death Eaters turned just as Professor Sheppard arrived. There was a brief freeze in time as Harry finally met the cause of the War. You-Know-Who was smiling at Neville, the Boy-Who-Lived, with a nearly demonic glee. Neville was paralyzed by the stare as the other students looked on in horror. Harry could see that You-Know-Who resembled a snake more than he resembled a human. Two red slits were perched above a very flat nose and thin lips. His skin took the color of a sickly grey, leathery and decaying as if it were the sole of an old shoe. However, it was still the gleaming red eyes that kept Harry's attention. It was only Professor Sheppard who could snap them out of their stupor.

"UP! GO UP!" Sheppard yelled as he conjured a powerful shield to stop the incoming curses.

The students immediately scrambled up the staircase as a fight ensued between Professor Sheppard and almost half a century of Death Eaters. Amazingly, he managed to hold off the curses so none of his students were hit with any spells. Once the last student was up the stairs, Sheppard quickly followed them, deflecting spells all the while.

"We're trapped up here," Ron calculated.

"No," Hermione gasped as she kept running up the stairs, "The Room of Requirement!"

"Room of Requirement?" Harry asked as he worriedly looked back for Professor Sheppard.

"Brilliant," Ron gasped as he tore up the stairs with renewed energy.

The rest of the students followed Ron as they themselves had no other place to go. Ron arrived at the seventh floor corridor and started pacing in front of a tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy teaching trolls ballet.

"Hey..." Harry muttered, recognizing the locale.

"No!" Hermione yelled as she pushed Ron out of the way, "Let me do it!"

"Now's not the time for this!" Ron yelled from his spot on the ground.

Hermione ignored him and paced furiously in front of the tapestry. Harry watched with amazement as a door suddenly appeared across the tapestry. Hermione started ushering the students in as she explained her outburst to Ron, "I had to make sure we wished the Room of Requirement couldn't be found by the Death Eaters."

"Good point," Ron admitted as he ambled through the doorway. One by one, the student filed inside their safe haven, leaving only Hermione, Neville, and Harry outside.

"How long do we wait for the Professor?" Neville asked.

"As long as we can," Harry could not leave the Professor behind in good conscience.

Sheppard hurdled around the corner, moving faster than Harry thought his old body could handle. A splash of sickly colored spells hit the wall behind him as Sheppard struggled to keep his footing. The old Auror's body was rusty with neglect and it was starting to lose steam from the extended climb and arduous fighting.

"Come on Professor!" Harry waved his arm and started firing spells at the Death Eaters appearing around the corner.

"Go!" Sheppard shoved Neville and Hermione inside. Harry did not budge and refused to go inside without the Professor.

Harry watched as the Professor threw an absurd number of spells and jinxes at the Death Eaters. There were no incantations or any predictable wand movements as the Auror pulled every trick out of his bag to hold the Death Eaters at bay. Harry did his best to help him as they slowly backed into the doorway.

They were almost completely within the room as Harry tugged on his Professor's sleeve. Just before they closed the door, a yellow spell hit Sheppard's arm and severed the appendage from his body. Sheppard yelled as he continued to fire aimlessly. Harry tugged the fallen teacher's body into the room as Neville shut the door behind him.

"He's bleeding," Harry gasped.

"He's not bleeding, he's lost a fucking arm!" Ron yelled.

"I don't know, I don't know," Hermione muttered as she inspected the damage, "I don't recognize this spell. I don't know what to do!"

"Neville, what do we do?" Harry looked up and asked the other boy.

Neville could only stare at them blankly, devoid of any solutions.

"Neville, what do we do?"

Neville simply stared at Sheppard as the blood poured out of his body. Hermione was on her knees beside the teacher as she frantically tried to summon a book that would provide her with the necessary counter-curse. The blood pooled around her and several books as she struggled to stop the bleeding. There was a shriek as one of the girls spotted Sheppard.

"Away! Everyone away!" Ron pushed them away as more and more people tried to see the cause of the shriek.

"Neville?" Harry yelled at him. The boy's mouth was opening and closing as he struggled to find the words to describe what was happening.

"Fuck it," Harry kneeled on the other side of the Sheppard, holding an arm to his own nose to block out the smell of freshly peeled flesh.

"Hermione, why can't you stop the bleeding?"

"None of the counter-curses are working!" she hysterically cried, "I tried all of the normal counter-curses for the Severing charm but this is different."

Hermione summoned another book and thumbed through the pages, her fingers painting the corners of the pages in red as she flipped through the book with blood-stained hands. The blood continued to gush out of Sheppard's shoulder in large spurts, his body growing colder by the second. Harry picked up a loose book that somehow kept falling to them from an invisible force in the room.

"It's Dark," Neville finally said, "That's why you can't fix it normally."

Hermione's head snapped up, her face visibly pale, "What - what - do we do?"

"Isn't there any way to stop the bleeding?" Harry pleaded.

"We - we - we could cauterize the wound. But I don't know if a Muggle way would take. If normal counter-curses aren't working, why would cauterizing the wound work?" Hermione questioned as another book fell into her hand.

"What's cauterizing a wound?" Neville asked.

"We have to heat up a piece of metal and apply it to the wound. The blood would coagulate and stop, but I don't know if he could get his arm back by magic," Hermione explained, "My Mum told me about it once."

Neville looked particularly disgusted by the thought of it, "Are you sure?"

"NO!" Hermione snapped, "I'm not sure, Neville, but I have to stop this somehow."

"How much time do we have?" Harry asked.

"Not a lot," Hermione replied grimly.

"Then do it."

Hermione hesitated as she met Harry's eyes. She was breathing heavily and considering the options inside that overpowering engine inside her head. She weighed the options carefully. None of the counter-curses would work and it would take ages to find the correct counter-curse for such a Dark spell. By the time she could find it and if she could somehow manage to even perform it, Sheppard would already be dead. A tourniquet was out of the questions since the wound was so high up on Sheppard's shoulder, which left cauterization as the only plausible option.

"Neville, clear everyone away and put up a Silencing charm around Harry and I. Harry, you're going to have to hold him still if he manages to regain consciousness. I'll - I'll do it," Hermione ordered it, slightly faltering as she realized the gravity of the situation.

Neville nodded and started to clear everyone away from the area. Hermione suddenly summoned a metal object from thin air. There was a long handle and a large, metal plate attached to the end of it.

"How are you summoning these things?" Harry asked in awe.

"It's the Room of Requirement, it gives you the things you require but only up to a certain point. You have to have the specific thing in

mind otherwise I would have already summoned the correct book needed for the counter-curse. Incendio," Hermione pointed her wand at the metal plate and watched it start to glow a dull red.

"I've never done this. I don't know how to do this correctly," Hermione exhaled deeply when she determined the object was ready.

"I'm right here with you. You're the only one that can do this," Harry said as he held on to Sheppard's body.

Hermione nodded and pressed the hot, metal plate to Sheppard's limbless shoulder. The sound of burning flesh filled the surrounding area, causing Harry and Hermione to gag slightly as Hermione kept the plate pressed against the offending area.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Sheppard woke up and started to shake from the severe pain. Harry held him down as best as he could until Hermione could finish the process. Harry hoped that Neville's silencing charm held because Sheppard was still screaming in an inhumanly tone. Harry grit his teeth as he struggled to constrain the older man, his body bucking to relieve himself of the pain. Mercifully, Sheppard passed out again.

"It's done," Hermione fell backwards on her haunches unsteadily as she stared, horrified, at her handiwork.

The blood at least looked like it had stopped flowing, but the wound looked even worse. The flesh and blood vessels were burned and melded together in a grotesque portrait of dead muscle tissue. Harry had to look away before he threw up, his head burying itself in the crook of his elbow as he struggled to maintain the remnants of his lunch. The smell started to overpower his senses until Hermione whispered a cleaning charm which did much to relieve Harry's nostrils.

"I don't know if it'll hold, we have to disinfect the wound, we have to..."

SPLAT.

Blood burst out of the open wound yet again as it somehow pushed through the coagulated blood. Hermione watched in abject horror as more of Sheppard's blood poured out of the wound. Sheppard woke up again, his screams piercing Harry's eardrums. Harry scrambled over to Sheppard and pointed his wand at the professor and attempted to perform a Sleeping charm on him. Sheppard, instead, continued to keep voicing his pain.

"What happened?" Harry yelled over Sheppard's screams.

"I don't know!" Hermione looked truly stunned, "That should have stopped it - there's no way!"

They looked on, neither of them knowing what to do in this situation. Sheppard continued to remain conscious as he lost more of his blood, the pain of the cauterization somehow unable to send him back into the peaceful realm of unconsciousness. The yells morphed into moans as Sheppard pleaded nonsensically for the pain to go away.

"Avada Kedavra."

A bright, green light flashed in front of Harry's eyes as the spell hit Sheppard square in the chest. Harry blinked in surprise, not quite knowing what had just unfolded. Hermione's mouth was ajar as her eyes looked up to see who cast the Killing curse on their teacher. Draco Malfoy stood over the pair, his eyes coldly fixed on Sheppard as he tucked his wand back into his robes.

"Dark Severing Hex. He was going to bleed out," Malfoy whispered before turning around and walking away from the scene.

Voldemort climbed the winding staircase that led to the Headmaster's office. Bella and Peter followed close behind, curiously looking around the room. An assortment of gadgets and trinkets were sprawled across the office. The desk was relatively clean save for a container of Lemon Drops and a few pieces of official looking parchment. Voldemort looked at the office in disgust as he walked towards the bookcase in the back of the room.

"My Lord, Bates has informed me that the students have escaped into the Room of Requirement. The Room seems to have hidden them," Bella reported.

Voldemort paused his movements as he looked over his shoulder at the witch, "They will rear their heads eventually. Make sure Longbottom is to be taken alive. What of the old Auror?"

"MacNair hit him with his special version of a Severing hex he uses for creatures. He should not survive it," Bella said with a small smile.

"Wonderful," Voldemort muttered distractedly as he traced his fingers along the spines of several books. The bookcase suddenly popped open on one side, revealing a secret room behind it. Voldemort opened the bookcase and stepped into the golden room behind it. Aligning the walls were several blocks of ancient runes. Voldemort seemed to look around for a specific run as he examined the walls. Running his finger lightly along a set of runes near the corner of the room, Voldemort watched as the runes shifted from green to gold to red.

"The castle has been warded off from outside intruders for the time being. The old fool has made modifications to the defense system. A set of runes adorn the Entrance Hall. These set of runes are the only ones that can lower the defenses around Hogwarts. For now, they will not be able to cross the gates. Make sure the Entrance is guarded heavily," Voldemort ordered. Bella nodded and bowed her head low as she left the office.

"The sword is not here, Peter," Voldemort hissed as his eyes narrowed.

"Sir - sir - the Weasley boy said that Longbottom pulled the sword from the Sorting Hat after he killed your basilisk," Peter stuttered.

"The hat, you say?" Voldemort looked at the crumpled hat interestedly.

"Watch the door, Peter," Voldemort took the hat from it's spot on the stool and carefully placed it over his head.

"Ahhh, Tom. It has been a while," the Hat spoke.

"Has it been? I haven't noticed," Voldemort casually replied, "You know of what I seek."



"You seek many things, Riddle."

"The sword of Gryffindor. I must have it," thought Voldemort.

"The sword, you say? Why would you need the sword?" the Hat curiously asked.

"That is my business, you wretched waste of magic. You would do well to hand over the sword lest I destroy the last artifact of the Founders," Voldemort warned it.

"Do you think I care?" the Hat said softly, "I do not care if my magic is destroyed. Now, let's see what you hold inside your mind."

Voldemort steeled himself, caught aback by the Hat's intrusiveness. He attempted to bring his Occlumency shields to the forefront of his mind, but the magic of the Hat was too strong for even a wizard of Voldemort's caliber. Images of his conscious and subconscious flashed beneath Voldemort's almost translucent eyelids.

"You play a dangerous game, Riddle," the Hat said after it had viewed his mind.

"As do you. Summon the sword," Voldemort ordered, growing wary of the old magic.

"The path you are about to take is treacherous. It will lead to your downfall. The tower can not be raised."

Voldemort stopped, curious as to how much the Hat knew about said tower.

"There is no downfall for me; only victory. Now, the sword."

"I can not give you the sword," the Hat tiredly explained, "You can not raise the tower, Tom. The Founders have banished it to the deepest levels of the Earth and to raise the tower would set in a motion a chain of events that you can not possibly control. Do not raise the tower."

"We shall see about that," Voldemort yanked the Hat off and placed it on Dumbledore's desk, staring at it intently.

"My Lord?" Peter asked.

"How did you say Longbottom retrieved the sword?" Voldemort queried as he stared intensely at the Hat.

"He put the hat on his head, my Lord," Peter bewilderedly replied.

Voldemort continued to stare the Hat, mulling over it's words. Peter knew not of what the Dark Lord was thinking at the moment and was content with sitting in the dark. The less he knew, the less he could be punished. Voldemort turned around and fixed Peter with a thoughtful expression.

"We need Longbottom."

Harry looked at Sheppard's dead body with his arms crossed, not quite believe what just happened. Before the year started, Harry had never known anyone, at least not personally, that died. In a matter of weeks, he watched a number of people die in front of his own eyes, even by his own hands. However, he had never seen someone killed by the dreaded Killing curse.

Hermione sat with her back to a wall, crying softly to herself as Neville and Ron tried to console her. Every now and then, she would look at up Sheppard's body and sob even more, upset she was unable to save the Professor. Was the Professor really dead? Although he had not know the Professor well enough, Harry had come to grow fond of his teaching techniques. His impassioned speech only a couple days beforehand only increased Harry's admiration of the ex-Auror. Now he lay dead on the floor, a pool of blood forming a circle around him.

Scanning the room for one particular person, Harry set out on a march once he found his target. Malfoy was sitting on a chair, alone, on one side of the room. He was balancing his wand on the top of his fingers as he stared at his feet. Blocking out everything else in his mind, Harry grabbed Malfoy by the collar of his robes and slammed him against the wall.

"What the fuck did you have to do that for," Harry could feel tears burning through his eyes. Malfoy looked at him with a blank expression, not attempting to fight Harry.

"You're sick, you know that? You think you can just go around killing people? You think you can just get away with throwing around Unforgivables? You just killed a Hogwarts Professor!" Harry yelled at him. Malfoy did not respond, only blinking occasionally and staring unsmilingly at Harry.

"STOP PLAYING STUPID!" Harry roared, slamming the boy against the wall and feeling satisfied as he watched Malfoy crumple to the ground.

Malfoy regained his footing slowly, dusting off his robes and straightening them with tiny movements of his hands. Harry glowered in front of him, breathing heavily as he tried to intimidate the boy.

"He was going to die, I've seen that curse before," Malfoy whispered for only Harry to hear as he attempted to brush by the Gryffindor.

"And what? You didn't know how to fix it?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"That's the only way I've seen people fix it," Malfoy whispered again as he succeeded in passing by Harry.

Harry watched as Malfoy walked off into another obscure corner, sitting by himself as he continued to fiddle with his wand. It was only after a couple of seconds that he realized that everyone was staring at him. Flushing angrily, Harry quickly marched to Neville and pulled him up by the arm. Frog walking him into a slightly less busy area, Harry turned the boy to face him.

"What are you going to do?" Harry hissed.

"What do you mean what am I going to do?" Neville replied angrily, shoving Harry's hands off of him.

"In case you haven't noticed, our Professor just died," Harry struggled not to raise his voice, "Our whole Year is here. We're stuck in a room that we didn't have any knowledge about and a crowd of Death Eaters and You-Know-Who are inside of Hogwarts!"

"You don't think I know that? I saw it all too," Neville snapped.

"Listen," Harry tried to bring a calm to the situation, "Everyone's going to look to you. They're going to follow your lead; you have to do something."

Neville bit his lip as he looked at Harry and then back at the crowd of students waiting anxiously for the two to finish their conversation. Indeed, all the Fifth years were waiting for the their two appointed leaders to make a decision.

"I don't know if I can do this, Harry," whispered Neville, showing a little vulnerability for the first time.

"You have to, Neville. Else we're going to tear each other apart," Harry implored.

Neville gulped and nodded, straightening his robes. With one more encouraging pat on the back from Harry, Neville walked towards his classmates and cleared his throat as they looked at him expectantly.

"Um - I don't what to say, really. We have to stay here for now. This room will protect us. Hogwarts will protect us. Dumbledore will come back for us eventually. We just have to hold the fort until then," Neville started off weakly but gained more conviction as he spoke.

"How do you know Dumbledore is coming back?"

"What do you mean the room will protect us?"

"What if he doesn't come back, You-Know-Who is in the castle!"

"Voldemort," Neville glared at everyone who flinched, "can not stop Dumbledore from getting back into Hogwarts. He will get back. He's never failed us yet, and I believe he'll come back for us."

"He came into the castle when Dumbledore wasn't even here! How do you know Dumbledore can get back in?" Nott asked from the back of the group.

"You probably helped him in here," accused Ernie.

"We followed you in here in case you didn't notice," Pansy spat.

"Probably to sell us out," Ernie's hand twitched as it moved to his robes.

Harry had started to make his way Nott once the boy spoke out. As he reached the junction between the Slytherins and Ernie, Harry carefully placed himself in front of Nott just in case.

"Get out of the way, Potter! They'll stab you in the back too," Ernie pulled out his wand.

"Just put it away, Ernie," Harry demanded softly, raising an empty hand to placate the nervous boy.

"Everyone, STOP!" Neville yelled as the crowd started to grow restless.

"Neville, how are we supposed to trust them?" Ernie asked as he kept his wand trained on Harry and Nott.

"In case you haven't noticed, all of us are here. All of us ran away and if we wanted to sell you out, we would have Stunned all of you before you even knew they were coming. So why don't you just shut the fuck up and stop meddling in things you don't understand!" Nott yelled at the Hufflepuff boy.

"He's right, Ernie. They stay; we're all in the same boat," Neville exchanged a glance with Harry and nodded at the boy. Ernie huffed and puffed but eventually lowered his wand.

"We have to stick together if we're going to make it out of here."

"Lucius, report."

"The Room of Requirement seems to have moved. We're unable to locate it but awaiting its usual entrance on the Seventh floor. MacNair and Crabbe are stationed there while everyone else is on alert should any of the students pop up."

"Bella, report."

"The professors have predictably scattered once they realized the defenses to Hogwarts have been changed. There is no sign of Dumbledore yet, but multiple Aurors have arrived on scene to

assess the situation. All defenses hold strong, they will not be able to enter unless we allow them."

Voldemort contemplatively sat in the Headmaster's chair on the High Table. What had begun as a quick snatch and grab job had turned into something a little more complex. Since he was unable to retrieve Gryffindor's sword from the onset, Voldemort would have to resort to different means in order to have the sword in his grasp. It was the key to moving forward in his future plans. Though he knew the defenses of Hogwarts would hold strong since he adjusted the runes, he did not know whether or not Dumbledore had made some modifications in case anything of this nature were to happen. The longer they remained at Hogwarts, the more likely Dumbledore would find a way inside. Since the students seemed to have commandeered the Room of Requirement, there was no other exit besides the front gates.

"Have everyone be on high alert for any pop up of the students. They can not stay holed up in the Room forever. Make sure you keep all of the house elves in the kitchen," Voldemort gave his final orders.

"The house elves, my Lord?" Lucius asked dryly.

"Yes, Lucius, the house elves," Voldemort eyed the elder Malfoy intently. Malfoy flinched and bowed his head.

"Bella," Voldemort called for her, "Under no circumstances should any one aim to kill for Longbottom. He is to be taken alive at all costs. Kill the spares."

"Yes, my Lord," Bella murmured as she left to deliver the proper orders.

Voldemort sat back into his chair as he considered the rest of his options. It seemed as if Longbottom was the key to extracting the sword from the Sorting Hat. For some reason or another, the Hat was literally not allowed to give Voldemort the sword. Voldemort suspected it might have something to do with the Gryffindor lineage. If Longbottom was able to summon the sword before, he could do it again. The only problem would be convincing Longbottom to extract the sword.

It was not so simple to just place the Hat on the boy's head and have the sword fall out. Longbottom would need to call for the sword and Voldemort was not quite convinced the boy would do so if he suspected any sort of trickery. Voldemort needed a back-up plan in case things went awry. Every day spent in Hogwarts only increased the unpredictability of this hostage situation. Though the students had escaped into the Room of Requirement, the Aurors and any outside forces did not know any of that and would act as if Voldemort had the students hostage. An idea suddenly slithered its way into the Dark Lord's head.

"Peter, find me as many books on blood lineage as you can. Concentrate on those related to Gryffindor."

Harry sat with his back to the wall, inspecting the Room of Requirement as the day grew longer. Checking his watch, Harry realized that the sun had set nearly an hour ago. Somehow, the Room was able to provide the same food produced in the Great Hall for the students. Harry was thankful for this slight gift. If nothing else, it would keep Ron from bemoaning their already lamentable situation. Neville's speech did not completely soothe the souls of the rest of the Fifth years, but they seemed to have calm down a bit and settled into the Room.

Predictably, the Fifth years had fractioned off into their own groups. The Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws sat in a sort of large, amorphous circle. Within this circle, smaller groups splintered off depending on the friends around them. Most of them sat huddled around their food, quietly talking about the day. Pillows and makeshift mattresses had been summoned to allow them some comfort.

The Slytherins, on the other hand, were set quite a couple yards away from the large group of students. Occasionally, Ernie or some other offending student would send a glare their way but they did not dare do anything once Neville deemed the Slytherins trustworthy. Truthfully, Harry could see Ernie's point of view as being slightly valid. Most, if not all, of the Slytherin's parents were at least Death Eaters or cooperated with Voldemort. It was quite a surprise to even Harry that the Slytherins had followed them into the Room of Requirement.

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ron sat off to the side of the main group of students. Hermione was still quiet following the death of

Sheppard while Ron and Neville conversed idly about the situation. Malfoy sat off in his own corner, neither looking happy nor sad. He simply twirled his wand in his hands as he stared at a fixed spot on the wall.

"Do you think they know by now?" Harry asked.

"They have to know. The Professors would have tried to get back into Hogwarts by now. Do you think they're fighting outside?" Ron worriedly chewed on a piece of bread as he stated the obvious.

"We can't know for certain," Neville answered, "They're either fighting to get back into the castle or Voldemort - stop flinching Harry - stopped them somehow."

"Sorry, still getting used to it," Harry apologized.

"Don't worry about it."

"What about them?" Ron inclined his head towards the Slytherins.

"It's illogical for them to have followed us in here," Hermione spoke up for the first time. She sniffled a bit before continuing, "They could have easily taken us out several times when we were trying to get away. I don't know what Voldemort wants, but he certainly did not plan for all the Slytherin students to be in the Room of Requirement with us. Either way, if they try to get outside to inform the Death Eaters of where we are, I made the Room so they wouldn't be able to do that."

"So you control the Room?" Harry asked.

"More or less. Since I was the one that paced in front of it, it adjusts to what I want."

"Couldn't you have wished for an exit out of Hogwarts?"

"It doesn't work like that," Hermione shook her head, "It's just a room, not a teleportation device."

"What's teleportation?" Ron wondered aloud.

"Don't worry about it."



The quartet fell into silence as they pondered Hermione's words. It seemed as if the Room of Requirement could provide them shelter and keep them hidden from the Death Eaters but not much else. Harry's eyes roved to the Slytherins again, watching them curiously. Out of the corner of his eye though, Harry spotted a flash of blond hair. Instead of Malfoy, Harry was surprised to find Luna Lovegood.

"What's Luna doing here?" Harry wondered, mostly speaking to himself. Neville overheard him and turned around to find that the Fourth year Ravenclaw was sitting amongst the students.

"Luna's not in our class," Ron squinted at her, making sure she was indeed in the Room and not a figment of his imagination.

"Probably just wandering the halls," Hermione dismissed the girl with a wave of her hand, "Ginny told me that Luna doesn't like going to Hogsmeade by herself."

"That is true," Harry scratched his head, still puzzled as to why he kept running into Luna.

"Anyways," Neville piped in, "I have an idea."

"What?"

"Why don't we go outside and see what they're up to?"

Harry looked at him as if he had lost his mind, "Yeah, Neville, let's stroll out into the hallway and asked one of them what their plans are."

"I knew you'd say that," Neville smirked, "Hermione, if you're in charge of the room, can't you ask for the exit to appear anywhere in Hogwarts?"

Hermione scrunched her face as she considered Neville's request, "In theory, I should be able to do that."

"Okay, good. So we can just go and try to see what the situation is out there. If the Professors are trying to get in, we have to help them. If they can't get in, we have to try to inform them of us at least."

"And how are we going to inform them?" Ron asked sarcastically, "Just wave our hands at the top of the Astronomy tower?"

"No," Neville flushed, "I hadn't gotten to that part yet."

"It's good enough," Harry concluded.

"You're all crazy," Hermione said, a stricken look on her face, "You can't really expect to go wandering around the halls with a bunch of Death Eaters patrolling them. Do you know what they could do to you!"

Hermione pointed her finger at Sheppard's body.

"We'll be careful," Neville reasoned, "We know this castle better than them. We've been practicing in it forever."

"Harry," Hermione pleaded as she crawled over to him, "Please don't do this."

"Hermoine, we have to do something. We can't stay in here forever. If nothing else, we can at least bring back some news to the rest of the people," Harry said with a pained voice. Hermione fell silent, crossing her arms and glaring at Harry and Neville.

"How many people do we need?" Ron started surveying the crowd.

"Small group," Harry answered, "Just enough to help us if we're in trouble. Any larger and we're going to be running around with too much noise."

"Okay, us three -" Neville started, pointing to Ron, Harry, and himself.

"No!" Hermoine exclaimed, "Me too!"

"No," replied Harry, Neville, and Ron succinctly.

"That's not fair. I've been doing this a lot longer than you have Harry!" she tried to guilt him.

"But you're the one in charge of the room. What if you leave and then the Death Eaters find a way back in?" Harry tried to reason with her.

"You don't even know if that's what would happen," Hermione stated stubbornly.

"Look. Let's see if your 'exit door' theory works. If it does, we'll see where we can go from there?" Harry tried to think of any loopholes to his conclusion but found none. Hermione fidgeted for a moment, trying to pick out a fallacy in Harry's argument. After a moment, she sighed in defeat.

"Please, be careful," Hermione whispered, her eyes darting between the three boys.

"Aren't we always?" chirped Ron. Hermione shook her head before fixing Harry with a stare. She was practically pleading with her eyes to keep them safe. Harry gave her a slight nod of his head, indicating he received her message.

"Alright then. Who else?" asked Neville.

"Need to keep this quiet. Padma, she's discrete enough," Harry pointed to the Ravenclaw section.

"Terry, too. He worked well with us," Neville looked at Ron for confirmation. Ron nodded back.

"Alright, that should be it."

"No Malfoy? You two can't seem to stay apart," Ron said to Harry, watching the other boy's reaction.

"No," Harry looked darkly at Malfoy, "Don't bring him."

"Okay. Harry, you go talk to Padma. I'll talk to Terry," Neville brushed his hands off on his pants as he stood up.

After a few moments, Padma and Terry were now sitting with the main group. As Neville informed them of the plan, Harry took the time to rub Hermione's shoulder comfortingly.

"Are you okay?" Harry said quietly.

"I'll be fine. I've just never seen someone die before," Hermione's eyes flicked over to Sheppard again.

"You did everything you could."

"I know," Hermione exhaled loudly as if she were trying to expel her negative emotions, "I think I'm still in shock."

"You'll be alright," Harry gave her one more squeeze on the shoulder before turning back to Neville. Neville eyed him oddly before quickly masking his face.

"They're good to go. Hermione, put us on the Sixth floor. Close the door behind us when we leave and focus on having an entrance for us on the Fifth floor near the prefects' bathroom. Give us ten minutes before making that door. If we're not back by then -" Neville gulped.

"You'll be back," Hermione stated, her face resolute.

"Right. Everyone set?" the rest of the group nodded as they made their way to one side of the room, trying not to be noticed by the rest of the Fifth years.

Hermione closed her eyes as if she were concentrating on a particularly difficult Arithmancy equation. After a moment, a door shimmered into view right next to Harry. Harry gave a thumbs up to indicate that the door had worked. Harry's heart started beating loudly in his chest as he turned the knob of the door and poked his head outside. Thankfully, Hermione's theory held true as Harry found himself near the boys' bathroom on the Sixth floor. Signaling that it had worked, Harry quietly made his way outside and held the door open for the other four people. Once they were all outside, Neville took lead while Harry brought up the rear.

Silently making their way through the hall, they were relieved to find that none of the Death Eaters seemed to be in this hall. Harry cast a Supersensory charm on himself as he kept his eyes peeled and his ears trained for any movement. Ron, Padma, and Terry kept their wands trained as they made their way through the dark hallway. Neville held a hand out to indicate the group to stop. Harry suddenly

heard two sets of footsteps through his Supersensory charm. He put his hand on Ron's chest and pushed the boy back to the wall. The other three followed suit once they realized what Harry had done.

Harry pressed himself against the slight alcove as tightly as he could. He took in shallow breathes, careful not to make too much noise as the footsteps grew louder. The loud thumps were almost around the corner as Harry tightly gripped his wand, prepared for any sort of duel. Preferably, the group would have liked to stay incognito for a while, but if they were forced to engage, they would not go down without a fight. Harry could hear the beating of his own heart as the noise decibel increased. He hoped that the Death Eaters could not hear the rapid beating of his organ.

"Keep an eye out, Alceto," growled a deep voice.

"I always forget you only have one eye now," Alceto replied in a bored tone.

"I could do the same for you."

"Bates, as alluring as that sounds, I'm afraid I'll have to pass."

Bates and Alceto turned the corner and continued to walk in an unhurried pace. To the group's good fortune, the pair had turned down a different corridor, leading them away from their position. As the pair walked by a wide window, the shine of the moon cast a dim light on the pair. As Harry squinted his eyes to make out the two figures, he quietly gasped as he saw a large tattoo on who he assumed to be Bates' neck.

Bates froze and slowly turned on the spot, his eyes looking into the darkness. As he turned, Harry immediately recognized his face though it had gone through a few changes since he had last seen it. There were red burn marks and deep scars along his face. One eyelid seemed to have welded shut, the magic not allowing it to heal. Still, with all of his grotesque features, Harry immediately recognized Bates as the main antagonist at Godric's Hollow. He was the one who killed Malfoy's mother.

"What is it?" Alceto complained, "If we take any longer, the Dark Lord is going to kill us like he's been doing with everyone else."

"It's nothing," Bates growled, "Let's go."

Bates turned around but not before looking at Harry's exact spot. Harry held his breath this time, making sure not to show any surprise or move so much as a hair follicle. The group did not move until Bates and Alceto's footsteps had diminished into nothing but slight vibrations on the ground.

"Come on," Neville whispered.

Harry gulped as he followed the group around the hall. They continued their reconnaissance for a couple more minutes, making sure to check through the windows whenever they could. Every now and then, Neville would pull out a worn piece of parchment and stare at it for a few moments. Harry could only assume that he was writing notes since Neville did not allow for anyone else to look.

"Let's go back," Neville said, apparently satisfied with the mission. Harry checked his watch and saw they had time to arrive at the Fifth floor. They quietly made their way down the staircase, only once stopping to avoid a Death Eater patrol. Finally finding their way to the prefects' bathroom, they let out a sigh of relief as a door shimmered into view. They were not expecting to find the calamity that was ensuing inside.

"I couldn't stop them," Hermione explained as she watched in dismay.

The large mob of students had surrounded the Slytherins. Harry could distinctly hear them arguing about the Death Eaters and their loyalty. No wands had been pulled out yet but it looked like the students did not need them. Ernie looked intent on hitting Nott with his fists as the mob continued to taunt the Slytherins, the noose growing tighter and tighter around house of green. Harry immediately ran for the circle, struggling to fight through the crowd in order to reach the Slytherins.

"You're just waiting to sell us about!" yelled Justin.

"Shut up, you stupid ingrate. You'd probably quick as shit your pants if you ever came up against the Dark Lord," Blaise responded viciously.

"The Dark Lord," mocked Michael Corner, "Only Death Eaters call them that!"

Finally breaking through the crowd, Harry once again placed himself between Ernie and Nott. Ernie glowered at him while Nott looked offended that Harry would come to his defense yet again.

"Get out of the way, Harry."

"Stop putting yourself in between this, Potter. You have no place here."

Ernie and Nott respectively ordered Harry, but the boy refused to move. Fixing both of them with a glare, Harry yelled loud enough for everyone to stop squabbling.

"Have ALL of you forgotten what Sheppard asked of us?" Harry yelled, grabbing the attention of the crowd.

"That man is dead and the rest of you are making fools out of yourselves! You dishonor his sacrifice by fighting like this! By acting like a bunch of nine year olds fighting at the park. That man -" Harry jabbed his finger to the dead body, " -DIED to make sure all of us could escape alive. All of us! That means you, Nott and you too, Ernie."

Harry breathed hard through his nostrils, the anger coursing through him as stared at them disgustedly, "So I don't care if you don't like each other. I don't even care if you think they're Death Eaters. The fact of the matter is that they've done nothing to try to hurt us and if they do, I'll be the first one to offer myself to You-Know-Who."

"We went out and checked Hogwarts. There's no one here. No Professors, no other students, not even Filch. So whether you like it or not, we're stuck here until we find a way out or Dumbledore finds a way in," Harry paced in front of them.

"If we don't fight together," Harry slammed his fist against an open palm to make his point, "They're going to rip us to shreds. They're older, they're wiser, and the Death Eaters sure don't give a damn about killing all of us."

"Other than Defense, you couldn't pay all of us to sit in a room together. But we're all here now and Merlin knows how long we're going to be here. So if we can't live together -" Harry paused, making sure everyone could hear him, " -We're going to die alone."

Harry finished talking, glaring at Ernie and Nott before turning on his heel and walking away. The crowd parted for him, still processing what Harry had said. Keeping his eyes glued in front of him, Harry walked to Professor Sheppard's dead body and pulled a blanket over him. As he looked back, all of the students were still staring at him in awe. Harry tore his eyes away and made his way back to his spot on the wall.

Looking up, Harry found that even Malfoy was looking at him with a curious expression. As they met eyes, Harry tore his away, hoping that Malfoy could not somehow magically read minds. Harry had not decided whether or not to tell Malfoy about Bates.

"I need help. We all need help," Harry whispered to himself as he closed his eyes.



Two days had passed since Voldemort attacked and invaded Hogwarts. The Room of Requirement remained filled with the Fifth year students of Hogwarts. The two days were spent with the students lying idly about. Since Harry's speech, the atmosphere was generally more amenable towards the Slytherins. Though they still remained quartered off from the other students, there were no attempts to provoke or anger them in any way. On the second day, Harry started to toss targets into the air and stun them in mid-air. It proved an entertaining and stimulating exercise to break the boredom.

The Room seemed to have provided the students with permanent shelter. On a lesser note, there seemed to be no indication that there was any attempt of rescue. Harry and Neville had gone out again with a little scouting party and found the situation unchanged. There were still Death Eater patrols and no sign of Dumbledore or any of the other Professors. On a better note, Ron twice spotted Auror robes in the distance from the Astronomy tower. Unfortunately, Hermione could only open and create entrances in certain, select hallways. The Astronomy tower was at least a five minute run to the nearest Room of Requirement entrance and thus, did not allow the group to send sparks in the air for rescue. They needed another way to make contact with the outside world.

"What about the portraits?" Harry asked.

"No go," Ron shook his head, "I tried to talk to Sir Cadogan and even he wouldn't talk. You-Know-Who must have done something to the portraits."

"How is he doing all of this?" Neville wondered.

"Hogwarts: A History," Harry and Hermione simultaneously replied.

"You're joking," Ron's face was serious as he looked at both of them with utter disgust.

"It's true," Harry shrugged, "It doesn't go into detail in the book, but in the Headmaster's office, there's something that helps control the wards and defenses of Hogwarts. I guess You-Know-Who - sorry - is tapping into it."

"So we have to go to the Headmaster's office?" Ron asked.

"That's where Voldemort will be," Hermione grimly concluded, "He has to stay close to whatever is up there, right?"

"I agree," said Harry.

"Well if we can't break into the office, we have to get all the way to Hogsmeade to warn them," reasoned Neville.

"That's near suicidal," Hermione shook her head, her bushy hair flying about, "The Death Eaters will be watching the road to Hogwarts. We would never get across."

"The Willow!" Harry snapped his fingers excitedly, "Remember? I followed you guys in there and it took you to the Shrieking Shack. It's perfect!"

"It's not. Death Eaters have been watching it, especially Peter," Neville frowned.

"How could you possibly know that?"

"I just do," Neville replied uncomfortably.

"Yeah, but how?"

"It makes sense, Harry," Hermione exchanged a glance with Neville, "Peter knows about the Willow more than anyone else. They have to have at least one person guarding it."

"We can take on one person," Harry argued.

"There's more than one," Neville informed him.

"You can't possibly know that," their pessimism was starting to irritate Harry.

"Fine, come here," Neville motioned for him to lean close as he pulled that old parchment out of his bag. Neville produced what he called the "Marauder's Map" and explained to Harry how it worked and its origins.

"Padfoot..." Harry trailed off as he traced the names, "Moony must be Professor Lupin. Wormtail has to be Peter. Which leaves Prongs as..."

"Your dad," Hermione finished with a nod.

"He never told me about this," Harry frowned as he opened and inspected the map. The Trio exchanged glances that Harry did not miss.

"Wait. Did you guys know?"

The guilty looks on their faces could not be hidden. Harry bit his thumb, a bad habit he picked up when he was nervous or anxious.

"How did you guys know?" he asked, the betrayal in his voice evident.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione spoke up after Neville and Ron refused to say anything, "We stayed at Grimmauld over the summer and your dad would drop by for Order business every now and then. He told us a couple of stories."

"I see," Harry gulped as he ducked his chin to his chest, not wanting them to see the hurt in his green eyes. Taking his glasses off, Harry rubbed his eyes for a few seconds before placing the spectacles back on the bridge of his nose.

How many things did his father tell them exactly? Did he not trust his own son enough to impart him with stories of his childhood? Harry did never quite hear everything about his father's friendships with Sirius and Peter, which made sense at the time. It still did not stop the hurt from creeping into his heart when he thought of his father bonding with his friends instead of his own son.

"So - uh - why don't we just use the map all the time to avoid the Death Eaters?" Harry asked, eager to change the subject.

Neville looked at him weirdly before responding, "It's not that easy to keep the parchment out and your wand trained at the same time. You also have to stop every time you check it; it slows the group down. It's easier when there's less people."

"I wish someone would invent the magic version of the walkie talkie. So there's a lot of people guarding the Willow then?"

"At least three at all times," Hermione was still staring at him oddly, apologizing with her eyes. Harry avoided them for now, not wanting her to see the pain he felt.

"I've got it," Ron clapped his hands together, gazing around himself as if there were an invisible pantheon.

"What is it, Ron?" Hermione asked impatiently after Ron sat still, basking in his own genius.

"Give me a second, these moments are rare for me."

"What moments?" Neville asked.

"When I have a better idea than both of you."

"Ron..." Hermione warned.

"We fly!" Ron flapped his arms to imitate a bird.

"That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard."

"Not if there's only one person flying," Ron held up his index finger to make his point, "Hermione, can a good flyer get across the lake if he leaves from the Astronomy tower? The Death Eaters will get caught off guard and the lake's not that big! How big is the lake?"

"About a half a mile in diameter," she murmured, trying to calculate the odds in her head.

"That's just a whole mile all the way to Hogsmeade! We just need one person to get across the lake and get help. The Death Eaters can't give chase after that because of all the Aurors outside. It's perfect!" Ron grew more and more excited as he explained his plan.

"What's the good in that though, Ron? If they could have broke into Hogwarts, the Aurors would have gotten it by now. What's the point of one person escaping? In case you haven't noticed, there's forty-one of us in here," Hermione rebutted stubbornly.

"There's the trick. Once whoever's flying takes off, they'll be so busy they won't notice the rest of us getting down to the Willow and escaping. We just need whoever's flying to distract them long enough for us to get away! We can use the Map while the flyer is distracting the Death Eaters," Ron smiled smugly.

"It's risky, that's a lot of people..." Hermione trailed off.

"But it can work," Neville smiled, "We can get out of here."

Hermione stared at the two boys, biting her lip and scrunching her face in a manner Harry knew quite well. She was contemplating the decision in front of her, weighing the possible risk versus gain and the potential loss. Since they were facing Death Eaters, the potential loss was always very high. With the aid of the Map and the distraction, however, the chances of the plan increased tenfold.

"It's plausible," Hermione said after a few moments.

Ron and Neville whooped and hollered high fives as they finally found a plan Hermione was amenable to. Hermione did not respond as she continued to calculate and formulate the different scenarios in her head. There were plenty of negatives for the plan, but honestly, they did not know when they would ever be rescued and had little to no means of contacting the outside world. If they were to escape, it would best if the Death Eaters were caught off guard and for all of the students to leave at one time.

"Who's going to do the flying?" Hermione wondered.

"I will," Harry nodded.

"Wait a second, Harry," Ron approached him, "This is my plan. I should fly it; I can get to Hogsmeade."

"I'm the better flier and you know it, Ron. Plus, I have the Firebolt. There's nothing that can get across the lake faster than the Firebolt."

"I can fly the Firebolt too!" Ron argued, his face turning red.

"Ron, there's a reason I'm the Seeker. It has to be me," Harry tried to reason with the taller boy.

Ron looked at Neville for support but found the boy was looking back at his best friend hesitantly. Hermione also had a discomfited look on her face, her hands twisting the ends of her robes awkwardly.

"Both of you as well? You think Harry should fly it?" Ron asked incredulously.

"It's not that he's better on the broom than you are, Ron. It's just - we've all seen him fly and if anyone can do it and distract the Death Eaters long enough, it's Harry," Neville said hastily.

"I mean - he is the Seeker," Hermione mumbled in a barely audible squeak.

"You're just trying to take my plan away from me," the tips of Ron's ears were burning red at this point.

"It's a good plan, Ron. It really is! We won't be able to do it without you," Hermione said earnestly.

Ron still looked furious as he crossed his arms and glared at the other three plotters with avid animosity. He sighed and kicked his foot on the ground in an impatient manner as he spoke, "Fine. Harry can fly it; but let it be known this was my idea."

"All your idea, Ron," Harry said dryly.

"Fine."

"Good."

"Brilliant."

"So what next?" Neville asked, veering off the possible confrontation between Harry and Ron.

"My broom's in the dorm," Harry remembered with a sigh.

"Not like it's the toughest place to get into or anything. If I was Death Eater, I'd never look inside the common rooms for stray, wandering students," Ron commented facetiously.

"Got a better idea?" Hermione rhetorically asked, the menace in her voice clear.

"No, I already contributed my part."

"Well," Harry sent an annoyed look to Ron, "If all else fails, I can get my mirror."

"Mirror?" Neville asked, clearly confused.

"Now's not the time for vanity, Harry."

"The mirror, Ron-" Harry drawled out his name, "-can be used to contact your sister. She has a matching one that I gave to her for Christmas."

"You gave Ginny a mirror you can contact her with for Christmas?" Hermione asked in surprise, fidgeting slightly.

"You know; for the war stuff," Harry shrugged.

"Oh, of course," Hermione continued to fold and unfold the corner of her robes, not meeting Harry's eyes.

"We can get both," Neville interrupted the slight interlude, "We go from the Sixth floor up since they still have people stationed out front of where the Room of Requirement door would usually be. We climb up to the Seventh floor, grab the Firebolt and the mirror and go back to the Room of Requirement."

"That's a lot of exposed areas," Ron stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"It'll have to be a bigger group than usual. We just have to hope You-Know-Who doesn't catch wind of it enough to show up," Harry stated, looking at the rest of the students as he started to isolate the students needed to pull off this job.

"Guess we have to assemble a team then," Hermione brought out a parchment and started making a list.

Harry looked at her thoughtfully, a bemused smile on his face. Hermione caught the look and stared back at him quizzically. Harry laughed and shook his head.

"I think I saw something like this in a Muggle movie over the summer."

"Well that's unlikely. Muggles can't get into Hogwarts," Ron stated the obvious, completely missing Harry's reference.

"No, you idiot," Hermione threw a balled up parchment at Ron, "What movie, Harry?"

Harry shrugged and smiled slightly, "I forget. I remember something with a red light and a green light and a stick of gum but that's about it."

A group of seven people were gathered in one huddle in the Room of Requirement. Seven was the appropriate number for most superstitious Pureblood wizards and even for the Muggle-born wizards as well. The group was well rounded: Neville would take point and lead the group to the Gryffindor tower. Ron slotted in right behind him to back him up and read the Marauder's Map. Terry and Padma were the usual suspects in this case as they had already been on a couple of patrols beforehand. Harry and Neville compromised on the last two slots; Seamus was selected over Michael and Su Li mostly because he knew his way around Gryffindor tower and also because Ron did not get along with Michael on account of the fact that the Ravenclaw boy dated his sister. Neville selected Anthony Goldstein for reasons Harry did not know. Harry would be the rear guard of the group.

Harry was not satisfied with the current seven, however, and wanted to draft one more person. Striding over to the Slytherins, Harry tapped on the flap of their makeshift tent and waited patiently for an answer. Harry could understand paranoia but for the Slytherins to erect their own tent was just silly. Pansy Parkinson opened the flap of the tent and regarded Harry with slight surprise before she replaced the expression with her usual sour regard.

"Potter?"

"Pansy. Can you get Nott for me?"

"What for?" her eyes narrowed.



"That's between me and him," Harry coolly replied, not knowing whether or not he could trust all the Slytherins quite yet.

"Hmph. Fine. Theo!"

Harry bit back a laugh at the nickname and waited a moment before coming face to face with the new Slytherin leader. Ever since the events proceeding Godric's Hallow, the Slytherins seemed to have shunned Malfoy, though you could hardly tell from the boy, and appointed Nott their new leader. Nott looked down at Harry before speaking.

"Potter? What's this about?"

Harry quickly explained the situation to him and extended a proverbial carrot stick to the Slytherin, "I'd like you to join the group. I've seen you fight; it would sure help to have you out there."

Nott paused as he considered his answer, "No."

"Why not?"

"It's one thing to hide yourself from the Death Eaters, Potter. It's another thing to actively resist and engage them. We might not be selling you out but we're not going to go out of our way to make that lot mad."

"You're really just going to wait it out and pick the sides later?" Harry said, slightly caught aback by the Slytherin response.

"It's the Slytherin way," Nott shrugged, "Do everything you can survive at the expense of everyone else."

"How quaint."

"Quite," Nott said unsmilingly, "We'll be here when you get back, Potter."

Harry nodded, sighing at his failed mission. It would have gone a long way to soothe tensions if Nott joined the group and helped retrieve a key part in the plan to escape Hogwarts. Unfortunately for Harry, the Slytherins seem to have taken their snub from the rest of the Houses personally. Though he was glad they were not ratting

out their fellow students, he could not help but feel slightly disappointed that they were not going to actively pursue either course. You win some, you lose some as they say.

"All set, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah...Nott's not coming."

"I'm sorry," she patted him on the arm sympathetically, "It was a long shot anyways. I'm glad you're trying to do something about it."

"Some people," her eyes narrowed at Ron, "are a little too narrow-minded to think like that."

Harry shrugged, trying to play it off as nothing, "I learned over the hols that it doesn't matter what House you're in. They'll attack you anyways."

Harry glanced over at Malfoy. The boy was still fiddling around with his wand by himself, not bothering to remove his stare from his own hand. Hermione followed Harry's gaze and nodded her head in understanding.

"Live together, die alone?" she asked.

"You know it," Harry sent her a lop-sided grin which caused Hermione to grin back.

"Everything set?" Neville asked, casting a suspicious look at their close proximity. Hermione looked at Neville and then went out of her way to squeeze Harry's hand while Neville was staring at them.

"I'll go get everyone else," Hermione said as she smiled at Harry. Neville did not quite glare at Harry, but the look was definitely not friendly.

"Interesting," Harry murmured to himself as he watched Hermione gather around the troops.

The plan seemed simple enough. Hermione would create a door on the Sixth floor for the group of seven to exit the Room of Requirement. Upon exiting the Room, they would re-form on Neville as Ron checked the Marauder's Map. Once establishing a firm

sense of cover and direction, they would leap frog by pairs across the hallway until they reached the staircase, with Ron inspecting the Map the whole while to make sure there were no Death Eaters around. Since the staircase was incredibly exposed, they would simply have to time the Death Eater patrols so that all seven could sprint to the portrait of the Fat Lady.

Neville reached the portrait first and yanked it open, not bothering to give any sort of password since the portraits seemed to be frozen, "Quick, everyone inside!"

The group stumbled slightly as they entered the empty Common Room. Once they were all inside, Harry muttered an effective Colloportus at the portrait in hopes of keeping the Death Eaters out should they stumble into the room. Harry threw Neville a thumbs-up, indicating the perimeter was secure.

"Alright, Harry. Seamus. Upstairs and get the stuff. Two minutes tops!" Neville ordered, "I'll be on the stairs to relay any messages, everyone else assemble and defend the portrait should anything occur."

Harry nodded and leapt up the stairs two at a time, Seamus close behind him. He turned the appropriate corners to reach the Fifth-year dorms and wrenched the door open. He immediately went for his trunk as he started to toss random school materials into the air to dig out his Firebolt.

"Seamus, it's a hand mirror and it should be on my desk," Harry told the other boy as he spotted his Firebolt at the bottom of his magical trunk.

"Harry," Seamus said after a few seconds, "I can't find it."

"What?" Harry picked up the Firebolt in his hand as he looked around his bed.

"It's around here somewhere. Here, take the broom."

Harry tossed Seamus the Firebolt as he started to sprint around his bed to find the mirror. If Ron's plan failed, Harry really needed the mirror to contact Ginny and get some sort of help from the outside world. It was not underneath his bed nor was it on his desk.

"Harry! Seamus! We need to go! Death Eaters are closing!" Neville yelled from his spot on the staircase.

"One second! The mirror!" Seamus yelled back, "Harry, hurry up!"

"I need to find it," Harry muttered, throwing all of his belongings around as he attempted to recover the mirror.

Where is it? Where is it? Think, Harry. Last time you used it?

"I was talking to Ginny," Harry moved to the spot on the bed where he sat while he was talking to Ginny, "She had to go. I put it down...underneath my bag."

Harry threw the bag off the ground and found the mirror safely beneath it. At that moment, Neville stormed into the room, his eyes ablaze as he looked at the messy state of the dorm room.

"Now!"

"Got it!" Harry lifted the mirror triumphantly in the air.

The three Gryffindors ambled down the stairs to the Common Room. Just as Neville was about to yell an order, Ron stood up and held a finger to his lips, motioning for Neville to silence himself. Ron pointed at the map, then back out the portrait. On the other side of the portrait, Harry could hear distinct footsteps approaching the door. He held his breath, wishing for the Death Eaters to pass them.

As before, a haze fell over his head, distracting him for a moment. It felt as if something was probing his head, asking it questions. Harry fell to the ground on one knee, trying desperately to clear his mind. Looking around, Harry found that Neville was motioning for him to stand up.

"Harry, snap out of it. They've passed us, we have to get moving," Neville said, offering his hand to help Harry stand up. Harry looked up at him dumbly for a moment before regaining his senses and accepting the proffered hand of help.

"They've passed us but there's two more making their way around and if we don't catch up quick, they're going to find the door on the

Sixth floor!" Ron said desperately, checking and re-checking the Map.

"We have to sprint for it," Neville ordered.

"Five minutes, guys," Padma pointed at her watch, indicating Hermione would close the door and re-open it somewhere else if they did not return quickly enough.

"Five minutes it is," Neville muttered as he opened the portrait.

The situation had turned decidedly more difficult. They needed to sprint down the open, winding staircases to the Sixth floor. Once they reached the Sixth floor, they were not going to be able to leap frog their way across the hallways but instead go for a dead sprint in order to meet the deadline.

"Alright. Dead sprint for the Room. Watch each other's backs, it's going to get hectic for a moment," Neville ordered.

"Go."

The group sprinted down the staircase, careful not to trip along the way. Harry was last out of the portrait, forming the rear guard of the group. Their footsteps were loud and clattering as they could not afford the comfort of time. Harry could distinctly hear the voices of the Death Eaters echoing through the hallways of Hogwarts as if they were using their voices as sonar in much the same way bats use noises to find their targets.

They encountered their first bit of resistance once they reached the Fifth floor. A masked Death Eater turned the corner the same moment Neville rounded an adjacent bend. They were both frozen, a bit surprised to find each other. The Death Eater acted first, hardened by years of experience.

"Down!" Neville yelled as a boom echoed behind him, exploding fragments of stone surrounding all around the group.

They quickly exchanged fire as the group fanned out in the hallway, surrounding the lone Death Eater. The Death Eater was surprisingly amateur, focusing most of his attention at Neville. Twice, the Death Eater almost hit Neville with two different spells. The second spell

was a tell-tale Stunner that Neville managed to somehow bend around him once again. As Harry hit the Death Eater with a well connected Stunner, he turned to Neville as the group resumed their run.

"You have to teach me that one day," Harry said between gasps.

"Teach you what?"

"How you make those spells bend around you."

"Bend?" Neville looked at him curiously, "They don't bend, the Death Eaters just keep missing.

Harry looked at him confusedly but could not dwell on the words as another Death Eater turned the corner. Harry hit the adjacent wall with a Reducto, showering the Death Eater in rubble and momentarily distracting him. He aimed another well placed Severing charm on the rope holding the wooden chandelier above the Death Eater. The structure collapsed on the Death Eater, knocking him or her out.

"Good one, Harry!" Ron yelled.

"One minute!" Padma yelled as she looked at her watch again.

"Definitely not going to make it," Seamus muttered, still hauling the Firebolt.

"Hermione will keep it open a little longer," Harry assured them as they resumed their run, trusting Hermione enough to give them some leeway.

As they turned into one of the larger atriums of the Fifth floor, Harry felt a decidedly chilly presence surround him. Apparently, everyone else felt it as well as they slowed their run momentarily to defend themselves from oncoming spells. To Harry's horror, two red slits rounded another corner.

"Longbottom," You-Know-Who hissed.

Neville froze, entranced by You-Know-Who in some manner. This time, Harry snapped out of his stupor faster than anyone else as he

nudged Neville's shoulder. You-Know-Who was still all the way down the hallway and they could reach the Room faster than the Death Eaters could.

"Neville, go!" Harry whispered to him as he spotted two more Death Eaters turn the corner behind Voldemort.

Neville suddenly collapsed, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. Harry caught him before he hit the marble floor and looked at the boy in confusion. Everyone else looked at Neville in shock.

"Ron! Keep MOVING!" Harry yelled as he dragged Neville as best he could, "Anthony! Pick up Neville's feet and help me carry him!"

Later, Harry would recall that a simple levitating charm would have carried Neville back to the Room much quicker than two people trying to carry him. Under the pressure though, Harry made this slight mistake as the group started to run back to the Room of Requirement. Spell fire erupted in the hallway behind them as the group fell into an immediate retreat, blindly firing spells over their back as they did not dare contend with You-Know-Who.

"Protego Maxima!"

Harry yelled as he dropped Neville when he felt Dark Magic whiz over his shoulder. A disturbingly strong spell hit his shield and ricocheted in multiple directions, destroying the walls around him.

"Terry! Take Neville. I'll hold it off!" Harry ordered as he deflected yet another spell.

Harry felt movement behind him but could not spare a glance; the concentration needed to maintain the shield was sapping him of any other thought. Another spell collided with his shield, making Harry buck his knees at its strength. Harry barely avoided the Killing curse as the Death Eaters grew restless with this strangely potent student of Hogwarts.

"Harry, come on! Everyone's in!" Padma yelled from behind him. Harry pointed a well placed Reducto at the ceiling above the Death Eaters, obscuring their view long enough for Harry to escape.

Harry never saw the Death Eater from behind him.

The Death Eater grabbed Harry around the neck, unable to hit him with a spell as Harry fell into the Room of Requirement. Harry struggled to throw the attacker off of himself. The Death Eater had his hands around Harry's throat, choking him slightly as he hauled the younger boy to his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry thankfully spotted Hermione closing the door behind her, shutting out You-Know-Who and the rest of the Death Eaters. Harry felt the Death Eater point his wand to the back of his own neck.

"Everyone put your wands down!" The Death Eater barked, careful to place Harry as a shield in front of him.

Ron and Seamus immediately lowered their pointed wands, not trusting themselves to hit the Death Eater with a spell that would also not harm Harry. Harry grunted as he struggled to move from the other man's ironclad grip. His heart beat a thousand beats per minute as he struggled to reach for his wand. Groaning, Harry spotted his wand on the ground as he must have lost it in the scuffle leading to this hostage situation.

If I could just somehow loosen his grip.

"Now -" the Death Eater started but could not finish as the Death Eater felt a spark on his hand that was holding Harry.

The Death Eater released his grip slightly, wincing at the pain. Harry took the split second moment to shove him away. Almost thirty Stunners hit the Death Eater, knocking him clear off his feet and smashing him against an offending wall. Rubbing his hands around his throat, Harry croaked out a response.

"Thanks."

Outside, Voldemort watched as the door disappeared the moment it was closed from within. He whispered to himself, "Interesting."

"What do we do with him?"

The collective question was asked as the students stared at the stunned Death Eater. He was properly incapacitated and his wand removed, but that still did not provide an answer for the students. Neville remained unconscious quite a ways away from him, being



taken care of by Hermione. In the meanwhile, a debate was being held as to what exactly needed to be done.

"I say we just keep him Stunned," Ron shrugged.

"What if he wakes up at some point in the night when everyone's asleep?" Padma countered.

"We'll just take turns watching him, I guess," Seamus agreed with his fellow Gryffindor.

"We should just kill him," Nott spoke up amidst the squabbling.

"You'll never hear me say this again but for once, I agree with Nott," Ernie nodded his head at the Slytherin.

"We can't just kill him," Harry threw his hands up in exasperation.

"Why not Potter?" Nott argued, "He was going to kill you just a little while ago. If I was him - you can trust me on this because we're both Slytherins - I'd find any way I could to escape and then kill everyone in the room. It's only a matter of time before whoever's watching over him makes a mistake."

"Agreed again," Ernie nodded.

"We're not killing anyone," Harry said, the tone of his voice making his decision final. Nott shrugged and looked pointedly at the Death Eater, "It's only a matter of time."

"Listen, we're going to keep him Stunned. Padma, start a rotation and make sure there's two people on him. Nott, don't take this too personally, but let's try to keep the pairs so there's no two Slytherins one rotation," Harry ordered around.

"None taken," Nott shrugged placidly, "I'm not saying any one of us would kill him. I'm just saying someone should kill him."

"Dully noted," Harry said tiredly, "Give me the list when you're done Padma."

Harry rubbed his forehead as the group behind him squabbled yet again. It was hard work ordering around the rest of the group.

Everyone had different opinions on the subject and Harry had to somehow placate everyone while making sure that the job was completed. He sat down next to Hermione and watched Neville's unconscious form.

"How's he doing?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Hermione frowned, "He wasn't hit by any spells. I think he just collapsed."

Hermione intoned the last statement in more of a question than an objective statement.

"You-Know-Who was there," Harry paused as he shivered slightly, "He caught Neville's eye and Neville just fell."

"That's not good," Hermione muttered darkly.

"Does it have something to do with..." Harry pointed at his forehead, indicating he meant Neville's scar.

"Possibly," Hermione ran her hand over Neville's scar. A flare of jealousy erupted within Harry but was quickly calmed. Now was certainly not the time to have bouts of jealousy.

"Hey! He's waking up!" Hermione yelled, attracting the attention of his friends.

Neville's eyes fluttered for a moment before snapping open. Harry and Hermione gasped as they took in the sight of Neville's glowing, red eyes. Harry saw Neville's eyes flicker towards his wand but he reacted quickly enough to stop the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry immediately hit him with an Incarcerous and wrapped the boy up in ropes. Thankfully, this version of Neville seemed incapable of wandless magic.

"Harry, what are you doing!" Hermione shrieked as she approached Neville.

"Trust me. You don't want Neville near his wand right now," Harry remembered the other incident when Neville had similar, red eyes.

Neville struggled to escape from the ropes, twisting and turning while all the while roaring gibberish. When he finally deemed the ropes incapable of being broken, he turned his red eyes to Harry.

"You stupid little half-blood," Neville said in a voice that was not his own.

"What? Surprised?" Neville snarled at Harry's shocked expression, "Think everyone's going to feel sorry for you because your mother separated your father? That filthy little Mudblood shouldn't be allowed to separate herself from a real wizard. Ten Galleons says she got him with a Love Potion. Wanna take that bet, Potter?"

Harry stood there, dumfounded and shocked that Neville would say such a thing.

"Poor, little, unnoticed Harry Potter. Do you remember when everyone saw your boggart? Poor Harry Potter! The worse thing in his life is that your parents are separated. Wah, wah, wah!" Neville mockingly changed the pitch of his voice so he sounded like a child.

"And you," Neville turned to Hermione as best as he could from his prone position on the ground.

"You - I - trusted you," Neville's pleaded, his expression almost truthful had he not had red eyes.

"You can trust me!" there were tears in Hermione's eyes as she slowly approached Neville with an outstretched hand.

"No," Neville said viciously, "Not now, Mudblood. Never again with your pathetic insecurities. You think anybody actually likes you? Ron and I just use you for your homework. That's all, Her-mio-ne. Every time you walk away, we make fun of you. Every time you answer a question in class, we laugh behind your back at your need to prove yourself. Your need to be noticed."

"That's not true!" Ron yelled, his body shaking in fury.

"Don't get me started on you, blood traitor. Your poor worthy existence of a family serves as a back drop of your failure. There's nothing special about you, Ronald. All of your brothers have something important. All of your brothers serve a purpose in this

world. What do you do? Oh. You're a Keeper," Neville sneered, tearing apart Ron's heart with his mincing words.

He turned to Harry and Hermione, his eyes flashing menacingly, "Why don't you two just fuck and get it over with? I see all of your little glances; your little touches. Don't tell me you don't notice him, Mudblood. Don't tell me you don't notice how he follows you around like a little lap dog, his tongue hanging out of his mouth at your every word. Go ahead, Potter! I bet she likes taking it with her legs spread open. I bet she likes being dominated. Show her who's the bitch."

"STUPEFY!"

Harry roared the spell and hit Neville, finally shutting him up. The crowd that gathered around Neville looked stunned at his outburst, not quite believing their ears. Hermione was crying profusely, her head in her hands as she refused to look at her friend. Ron stood there, his mouth hanging open as he looked at Neville's unconscious form.

"That wasn't Neville," Harry said in a shaky voice as he ushered everyone away from the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Up, MacMillan. I have the next rotation."

"Really?" Ernie rubbed his eyes tiredly, looking up at the voice with suspicion, "Who's with you?"

"Potter."

Ernie narrowed his eyes at the other boy but eventually shrugged, "Alright. Anthony, wake up, we're off duty."

Ernie stood up and dusted his robes off, tired of watching the Death Eater in his stunned form. He bowed sarcastically the supposed next rotation, "He's all yours."

The quiet boy nodded and waited until Ernie and Anthony disappeared into their respective tents. He cast a Silencing charm around the area and knelt down so he could look straight into his eyes when he opened them.

"Rennervate."

The Death Eater woke and struggled against his bonds for a moment before realizing there were several ropes tied around him by different casters. He was not going to escape for quite some time. It was only after a moment did he realize that someone was standing over him.

"Do you know who I am?" said the boy.

"Of course," the Death Eater snarled.

"I'm going to do everyone a favor and kill you."

The Death Eater sneered as he kept on struggling with the ropes, "You can't kill me. You don't have the guts to do anything, you weak-willed son of a Death Eater."

"Do you really think that?" the boy responded calmly.

"You can't kill me. Not like we killed your whore of a mother. Bates is here to finish the job, you son of a -"

The Death Eater could not continue as the boy performed a Silencio on him. The Death Eater's mouth moved soundlessly, unable to communicate the rest of his taunts. The boy cocked his head, looking at him oddly before casting a Severing charm focused on the Death Eater's jugular vein. The boy watched as the Death Eater struggled to breathe, his mouth flapping open and close. His face was contorted in a pained expression as the blood seeped from his throat. It did not take very long for him to die.

The boy walked away and heard a scream nearly an hour later when the next patrol found the Death Eater.

Harry did not consider himself a cruel person. In fact, Harry thought of himself as a push-over most of the time. But things change.

"Rennervate."

Neville's eyes fluttered open, his pupils fighting to adjust to the bright light in his eyes. He tried to shield his eyes with his hand but found that his hands were bound behind him. It finally occurred to him that he was seated in a chair with his hands bound behind his back and a shining light directly in his face. Not good.

"Er - hello?" Neville called out.

There was no answer as the light continued to blind him. Neville attempted to move his head around and try to see behind the light but it was to no avail. Death Eaters? Neville's mind raced as he struggled to remember what lead to him being imprisoned in a chair. He remembered retrieving Harry's Firebolt and then encountering Voldemort. After that, it was a blur though he could hear an indistinct voice yelling at people in the back of his head. What could that possibly be?

He started to rock the chair back and forth, trying to throw himself to the ground and maneuver his way from there. It would be painful but it was better than sitting here and waiting for his captors. As he continued to rock back and forth, a voice suddenly cut through the light.

"You can stop."

Neville froze, unsure whether or not he should listen. The voice was vaguely familiar, but he could not quite spot it just yet. Still blinded by the light, Neville could only make out the dark shape of a body behind the light.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Neville did not respond, knowing that anything he said could be used against him. He squinted, still unable to see anything but the blinding light in front of him. Neville started fidgeting as he searched for his wand but felt nothing in his pockets even without his hands for help.

"Neville," Harry sighed, "It's just me."

They were set up in the corner of the Room of Requirement. A tent had been drawn around them to block anyone from seeing this particular project. Harry had placed a blinding light in front of Neville's face before he woke up, wary of which Neville would return. Would it be the congenial Neville that he regularly knew? Or would it be the You-Know-Who-possessed Neville that could hurt and destroy all of his friends? Harry had to make sure it was the former rather than the latter.

"Harry? What's going on? Why do you have me tied up?" Neville asked, angry at his imprisonment.

"Can you just answer the question?" Harry repeated.

Neville huffed, slightly put-off that he was being interrogated, "I remember getting your Firebolt and then seeing Voldemort. After that - it's - well - I don't remember much. I keep hearing yelling in the back of my head. Why? Harry, what's going on?"

"And that's all you remember?" Harry asked again.

"Yes," Neville sighed impatiently, "Can you let me go? I still don't understand why you have to tie me up and blind me."

"Not just yet."

"Not just yet?" Neville repeated incredulously, "Merlin. Harry, can you just tell me what's going on?"

There was a pause as Harry considered his options. Neville's eyes were not red; that much was certain. That was indeed a good sign. Still, without Madame Pomfrey's expert diagnosis, there was no way to know for certain whether or not You-Know-Who was out of Neville's head. Harry decided to test the waters and tell Neville what the boy said.

"Do you remember yelling at us?"

"Um - no?"

"Do you remember calling my Mum a Mudblood?"

"Harry! I would never call her -"

"Do you remember telling Ron he was an insignificant speck in the world?"

"No - I - why -"

"Do you remember basically calling Hermione a whore?"

"I WOULD NEVER DO THAT!"

"Are you sure?"

Neville was breathing heavily, straining against the ropes as he fought desperately to free himself from the chair. Harry knew that he had hurt Neville, but he had to make sure. He had to make sure You-Know-Who was not swarming around Neville's head somewhere. Judging from Neville's reaction, You-Know-Who was definitely not in Neville's head at the moment.

"Harry," Neville started shakily, "I don't know what's going on, but can you please just let me go? I swear to Merlin nothing you think is going to happen."

Harry shut off the light and for the first time, Neville could see the coldness in Harry's expression. His green eyes were far from warm or comforting but instead cold and calculating. Harry regarded him coolly, his face masked in discretion as he chose his next words carefully.

"I'll get you out, but I have to talk to some people first. Everyone's...unharmd if that's what worries you."

Neville nodded, still confused as to why Harry would be so cold to him. Harry nodded back to him before turning around and exiting through the flap of the tent. Neville could catch a glimpse of red hair outside before the flap closed and he was once again enclosed in the dark shadows of the tent.

"Is he okay?" Ron nervously asked Harry.



"He's himself again," Harry looked back at the tent as if he could see through the entrance, "He doesn't remember saying anything."

"Well that's good at least," Ron still looked a bit green at the thought of talking to Neville again.

"Yeah," Harry muttered in a disbelieving tone, "How's Hermione?"

"She's okay as she can be. I can't get her to talk to me though, you might have to try," Ron looked over at his friend.

Hermione was sitting with Parvati and Lavender, trying to help them master a particularly difficult hex they might need to use against the Death Eaters. She was demonstrating the wand movement to her two roommates, but Harry could see she was growing slightly impatient at their incompetence. Harry was glad she could at least keep herself busy.

"Anyways," Ron interjected, "We're in trouble."

"What? The Malfoy thing?" Harry asked with a dark expression on his face.

"No. That's a whole other can of worms we have to open up later. Harry, look at this," Ron pulled out the Marauder's Map and pointed at the spot near the Willow.

Six little dots were now surrounding the three as compared to the three dots that previously surrounded it. The Death Eaters were now roving that area in larger numbers, clearly protecting it. Harry frowned as he closed the map and looked at a concerned Ron.

"You think You-Know-Who might have caught wind of the plan through Neville's mind?" Harry asked.

"I think You-Know-Who definitely caught wind of the plan. He didn't catch all of it though. Look, there's still no one guarding the Astronomy tower," Ron re-opened the map and started looking for another location.

"So he only caught part of it. What do we do now?"

"I think I can still beat the crazy psycho. We didn't tell you this earlier, but there's another way out," Ron informed him.

"Another way? That really would have been helpful earlier on," Harry sarcastically replied.

"Well, there's a bit of a problem," Ron looked a bit uncomfortable.

Ron pointed at a passageway near the Defense classroom. There was only one little dot patrolling the corridor, but Harry could see why the Trio were hesitant to tell Harry about this other passage. The little dot was Lucius Malfoy.

"Oh."

"In light of recent events, I suppose we should keep it quiet that Malfoy Senior is patrolling that hallway or else we'll have to deal with another dead body around here," Ron looked at the younger Malfoy with a hint of fear in his eyes.

"I don't know what to do with him," Harry was referring to the younger Malfoy, "No one will come even close enough to think of trying to take his wand from him, but we can't just leave him here."

"Why not?"

"Ron, we can't just leave Malfoy to the Death Eaters."

"I still don't see your point. He'll get what's coming to him," Ron muttered under his breath.

"I'll talk to him."

"I wonder what that conversation will be like. Hey, Malfoy! Fancy going for a stroll; try not to kill anyone along the way! Or - hey, Malfoy - glad you could kill that Death Eater. You sure took a load off our hands," Ron imitated several voices as he mocked the faux conversation.

"We can't exactly punish him for anything. There isn't some sort of judicial system here."

"Who are we talking about exactly?" Hermione suddenly appeared at their sides.

Harry pointed his chin at Malfoy.

"I suppose we can't punish him but really he's a bit of a menace. Did you see what he did to that Death Eater?" Hermione pointed to the dead body.

"Honestly, it's just one more Death Eater down. I may not agree with his tactics, but Malfoy did do us a favor," Ron shrugged.

"Beyond barbaric, Ron. Glad to see you can keep your humanity about you," Hermione gave him a stern look.

"In case you haven't noticed, Hermione, they're trying to kill us all. All - of - us. Malfoy can be our personal Death Eater executioner," Ron made an axe swinging motion with his arms.

"Malfoy's not going to be anything," Harry kicked Ron lightly in the shin.

"Sheesh, excuse me for trying to bring a suggestion into the midst," Ron rolled his eyes.

"You should talk to him, Harry," Hermione encouraged him.

"And say what?" Harry asked skeptically.

"He seems to listen to you for whatever reason. If anyone can get him to at least listen, it's definitely you."

"Thanks, Hermione, but I don't know if that's exactly a good thing."

"It is a good thing, Harry. You help people. That's always a good thing," she said earnestly.

Ron coughed uncomfortably, his face looking slightly grumpy as he looked pointedly at the tent. Hermione suddenly realized who was in the tent and who might be in earshot and closed her mouth. Harry sighed as he looked at both of them.

"Neville doesn't remember anything," Harry informed her.

"Well - that's good," Hermione still looked uncomfortable.

"Do you think you can talk to him and let him go, Ron? I don't think I can handle it right now," Harry said to the other boy.

"I'll do my best. Hermione, help me?" Ron asked, clearly needing help in this situation.

"No - I'm sorry - I'm - Parvati and Lavender - have to go," Hermione stuttered, looking quite flustered at the prospect of seeing Neville so soon. She immediately walked as quickly as she could back to her roommates.

"I think Neville really hurt her," Ron frowned.

"You think?" Harry sarcastically replied.

Harry talked to Malfoy, which was akin to talking to a toaster. Malfoy gave subtle one word responses as Harry warned him that he was scaring people with his behavior. For all intensive purposes, Malfoy simply did not give a damn. Harry sighed as he walked away from the blond boy; there was no getting through to him. As Harry checked up on the various groups of people in preparation for their escape, he spotted Hermione Stunning several target dummies with a look of pure frustration on her face.

"Hermione," he called out from behind her. She apparently did not hear him or chose to ignore him.

"Hermione!" Harry called out a little louder.

Hermione turned around, clearly startled and fired a Stunner at Harry. Harry waved his wand and brought up his shield to deflect it, staring at her bemusedly all the while. Hermione's cheeks turned an adorable red as she profusely apologized for trying to stun him.

"Quite alright. We're all a bit tense today," Harry assured her.

"I'm so sorry! I'm - just - I'm a bit of a mess, aren't I?" Hermione smiled sheepishly.

"We're about to take on a group of Death Eaters. What's there to be worried about?"

"Correction. You're taking on a group of Death Eaters. We're simply taking on Lucius Malfoy. It's a bit of a mismatch, don't you think?" Hermione pointed out.

"Malfoy won't expect all of you to come at him at one time. Ron's done a good job planning this out," Harry looked at the other boy with some admiration. Though he could be rather pig-headed, Ron usually had everyone's best interests in mind.

"You get used to it after a while," Hermione said wryly.

Harry laughed before adopting a more somber tone, "How are you? With the whole Neville thing..."

"I don't know to be complete honest," Hermione wrung her hands anxiously, "I know it wasn't really Neville saying those things, but the things he said..."

"You know I don't think of you like that," Harry quickly interjected.

"You don't think to me in terms of what Neville said or you don't think of me like that at all?" Hermione immediately asked, qualifying her words carefully.

"And what if I did think of you like that?" Harry gulped.

Hermione paused, her eyes steady on his. Though Harry's heart was beating profusely, he kept eye contact with her as he sweated it out for her response.

"I wouldn't be opposed to it," she finally responded.

"I don't think I've ever gotten a maybe before," Harry commented.

"Speaking from your extensive dating experience are you?" Hermione half-smiled at him.

"Oh yes, of course. There were a lot of women before Cho. McGonagall, Pomfrey, Sprout," Harry listed off the teachers with his fingers.

"Sprout's a bit low for your standards, Harry," she teased.

"There's only been one standard for me," Harry looked at her purposefully.

She blushed and dropped her eyes first this time. She fidgeted with the edge of her robes like she usually did when she was nervous as Harry watched her squirm with a smile on his face.

"So all I get is a vote of 'not opposed'?"

"It's complicated," she said honestly.

It did not take Harry long to connect the dots, "You and Neville aren't - well - you two aren't..."

Harry could not quite say it out loud, but Hermione saved him the trouble, "No - no - nothing like that. It's just that - well - he needs me right now. He needs Ron and I to help him even if he doesn't want it."

Harry frowned internally but did not let it show on his face. One of the characteristics he loved about Hermione was how loyal she was to her friends. She certainly was not going to turn her back on her best friend even if a psychotic murderer was crawling around in his head. For once, Harry understood completely.

"You know you can't get rid of me that easily," Harry teased, "I can deal with close male friends."

"Can you now?" she asked with a raised eyebrow, "Because let me tell you; Ron and Neville are a handful."

"I've lived with them for five years; I can handle them," Harry winked.

Hermione laughed; a true laugh where the corners of her eyes crinkled and her teeth flashed against the light, "Too true, Harry."

After the chuckling died down, Hermione froze as she spotted something or someone over Harry's shoulder. Harry's smile slowly fell off his face as he turned to see Ron leading Neville out of the tent. Neville was wringing his hands, red marks showing exactly

where the ropes had cut off his circulation. Ron seemed to be talking to the Neville amicably enough. Neville, for his part, looked slightly grumpy but well for being imprisoned for most of the night. Neville caught sight of the pair and immediately started walking towards them.

Harry immediately shielded Hermione with his body as his face turned hard, regarding the other Gryffindor with a blank look. Hermione did not stop his movement in any way nor did she move out of the way from behind him. Neville saw the small interchange and clenched his jaw but kept resolutely walking to the pair, Ron not far behind him.

"Hermione, can I talk to you?" Neville addressed Hermione even though she was standing behind Harry.

Harry looked behind himself at Hermione questioningly. Hermione was frightened, the expression on her face fearful as she looked up on Harry. With his eyes, Harry communicated that she did not have to confront Neville right now. She nodded but took a deep breath of conviction. She squeezed his hand so Neville could not see and stepped away from Harry's shadow.

"Of course, Neville," she said quietly, "In private?"

Neville nodded as she led him away to a less occupied spot of the room. Hermione was careful to keep her distance from him. Harry watched them with concerned eyes, fearful that Neville might say something to push her further away. Knowing Hermione though, she would tough it out - because it was Neville. Harry turned around to see that the rest of the Fifth years were staring at them as if they were some sort of fascinating soap opera.

"Well, since I have everyone's attention, I guess we can go over the plan..."

The plan was simple enough from Harry's perspective. Hermione would open a door that would lead Harry to the Astronomy tower. For some reason or another, Hermione could not open a door that was immediately next to the Astronomy tower. Since Harry would be the most exposed, they handed him the Marauder's Map so he could navigate the hallways without encountering any Death Eaters. Though Hermione tried to convince Harry there was no need for him

to fly as a distraction, Ron immediately pointed out that it would take at least ten minutes for all forty students to safely crawl into the narrow pathway that lead to the Honeydukes cellar. Harry would indeed have to provide a distraction so the Death Eaters would not hear the clatter surrounding the statue of the one-eyed witch.

When Harry started his flight from the tower, Hermione would open a separate door that was very close to the Defense room and the statue of the one-eyed witch. They would overrun Lucius Malfoy and start to pile people into the narrow corridor that would lead them to their freedom. There were only two caveats to the entire plan; Malfoy and Neville.

Harry did his best to inform Malfoy of the plan and advise him that he did not have to go out of his way to kill anymore Death Eaters than needed. Harry declined to tell Malfoy that his father would be the one protecting the one-eyed witch; there was already enough drama surrounding Malfoy to add another compound to that particular mix.

As for the other caveat, the fact of the matter was that the rest of the students did not trust Neville to hold it together around You-Know-Who. Though Neville protested vehemently, the two occurrences where Neville was possessed by You-Know-Who was seen by the entire Fifth year population. Thus, they were well educated on Neville's sudden outbursts. Hermione wisely decided that it would not be wise to anger the rest of the Fifth years and volunteered to hold onto Neville's wand for him unless the situation turned dire. The rest of the students agreed with this treatment.

Harry was rechecking all of his equipment before he would start the arduous journey to Hogsmeade. He always kept his special holster but this time, he also had the Marauder's Map tucked into jacket. Harry had already discarded his robes as they would create a slight drag in the air and Harry needed all the speed he could garnish. He tried to raise Ginny with the Mirror earlier, but she did not respond. Seeing as he had no use for it outside or in the air, he decided to give it to Hermione.

"Hold on to this," he pressed it into her hand, "If I can somehow raise you on it, make sure you answer."



"I will, Harry. Good luck," she hesitated for a moment before raising up on her tippy toes and planting a soft kiss on his cheek.

"Who needs luck when I have that?"

Harry accepted the good luck's and amusing condolences of the Slytherins as he prepared to leave the Room of Requirement. Seamus and Dean surrounded him in a bear hug, repeatedly shedding fake tears as they said good-bye to their general. Harry was glad that the pair decided to take the amusing route though they knew Harry was about to launch into a dangerous task. Luna offered him a strangely emotional good-bye to which Harry did not know how to respond; he simply patted her awkwardly on the back as he kept moving. He shook Ron's hand before finally encountering Neville.

Neville immediately thrust out his hand, looking quite sincere when he said, "Thank you for doing this, Harry. Stay safe up there; we'll see you on the other side soon."

Harry nodded and smiled at the boy. Despite his You-Know-Who-induced comments, Harry could not help but like Neville. Hermione gave him one more fierce look before closing her eyes and concentrating on raising the door. A door shimmered into view in front of Harry. He did not bother looking back, knowing that for some reason or another, he would definitely not die today.

Harry pulled out the Marauder's Map and started to inspect the locations. You-Know-Who and Pettigrew were still in the Headmaster's office. A group of six names were patrolling the area around the Whomping Willow. Lucius Malfoy was pacing up and down the hallway where the secret passage was located. Though there were still several other Death Eaters patrolling the halls, there were only two Death Eaters on Harry's path to the Astronomy tower.

Stowing the map in his jacket, Harry gripped his Firebolt tightly and started to sneaking through the hallways. He spotted the first patrol and simply waited until the Death Eater passed him. Harry quickly moved from one alcove to another, staying light on his feet to avoid any noise. The second patrol passed him again and Harry was home free to the Astronomy tower. Leaping up the stairs two at a time, Harry found his way to the top in no time.

Now or never.

Harry mounted the broom and jumped into the air. It would not take long for the Death Eaters outside to notice him. Harry decided to give the signal to his friends as he lifted into the air. Pointing his wand at a random tower, Harry hit the said tower with a powerful Bombarda. The tower exploded and the rumbles could be felt through the castle walls. Harry hoped it was enough as he immediately started to maneuver out of the way from incoming spells.

Hermione was afraid for Harry. The stupid boy had since taken a cavalier attitude that both inspired her and made her fear for him even more. She knew that Harry had the much harder job in this escape plan and hoped with every fiber of her being that he would hold on and make it. She felt the slight reverberations of the castle shaking and immediately knew that Harry at least made it out of the Astronomy tower.

"Hermione, go!" Ron yelled.

Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated on a door that would lead to the statue of the one-eyed witch. Her wish was granted as the Room of Requirement created a door for the rest of the students.

"Attack group! Go, go, go!" Ron ushered a group of roughly ten students to take out the elder Malfoy. Draco was obviously not included for everyone's safety.

Hermione rushed out of the Room with her wand prepared. Lucius looked only a bit surprised to see the flood of students heading his way. He immediately started firing different spells towards them. Unfortunately for him, Ron had planned this takedown effectively.

Terry, Padma, and Ernie would immediately raise shields to fend off his first volley of curses. Hermione summoned a stone statue to absorb a Killing curse if Lucius felt particularly threatened. Lucius declined on the Killing curse and opted on more Dark curses instead. Noting that Lucius had released his first volley of curses, Hermione immediately banished the stone statue in his direction.

Lucius deflected the statue easily but could barely shield himself from the secondary group of Stunners behind it that were fired by

Seamus, Dean, and Michael. He fought off those series of spells and stepped back as he continued to turn away volley after volley of spells. Three groups of three took turns hitting Malfoy with wave after wave of different hexes, keeping him indefinitely on the defensive. Hermione simply waited until his shield was weakened.

Even a wizard of Lucius Malfoy's caliber could not hold strong against every spell for a continuous thirty second span. Hermione finally saw an opening and hit him with a Stunner. After he fell, the rest of the attacking group hit him with their own Stunners to ensure his defeat. Kicking away his wand, Hermione signaled to Ron that the coast was clear.

"We're in business!" Ron yelled as the rest of the students piled out of the room.

"Dissendio," Hermione said the word that would open the hump of the statue and allow them into the secret passage.

The students started climbing into the passage while the rest of them took defensive positions to cover the hallway. Hermione could hear the yells of Death Eaters outside and took a moment of reprieve to wish that Harry be okay. Nott was holding his wand out beside her as he kept his eyes trained. All of a sudden, he froze as he noticed something suspicious on the wall. Hermione picked up on his behavior and asked him what was wrong.

"There's something off," Nott muttered.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"I recognize those symbols," Nott pointed out at four triangles that were located on each side of the one-eyed witch, "I've seen them at my house. I just don't remember what they're for except that -"

Nott froze as a look of recognition fell over his face.

"Nott, what is it?" Hermione asked in a panicky voice.

But Nott was immediately trying to wrench Ernie away from the open portion of the passage. Ernie yelled as Nott pulled him to the ground.

"Nott, wait your turn!" Ernie yelled.

"DOWN!" Nott yelled as he shielded Ernie's body with his own.

BOOM.

The witch exploded in a fiery blaze, blowing Hermione clear off her feet. The ringing in her ears was deafening as Hermione tried to sit up, shaking her head to try to clear the effects of the percussion blast. She groaned as she saw that the passage was blocked off, the resulting explosion of the witch causing a downpour of rubble that sealed the secret passage.

"Trap," she whispered to herself.

In the distance, even through the slight ringing in her ears, Hermione could hear the distant footsteps of Death Eaters getting closer and closer to them in the hallway. She looked desperately to where the Room of Requirement door was previously at but found it was gone. She crawled to Ron, who was holding his jaw as he tried to regain his bearings.

"Ron! We have to go!" she yelled at him.

Only ten students had made it through the passage before the witch exploded, leaving the rest of the students still on the Hogwarts side of the wall.

"What?" Ron yelled back, trying to pick the dirt out of his ears.

"WE HAVE TO GO!" Hermione yelled into his ear.

Ron received the message this time and clambered to his feet. Hermione made her way to Neville and shook him on the shoulder. He was bent over on his knees, coughing up dust as he tried to clear his lungs.

"Neville. Death Eaters on the way. Take your wand," she gasped out as she took deep breathes to steady herself.

Neville nodded and stood up as she placed his wand back in his hands.

"Willow! It's our only shot!" Neville yelled.

"Someone help me!" Ernie shrieked as he tried to pick up an unconscious Nott. Nott's back was covered in scars and burns, a consequence of his heroic act. Blaise Zabini ran over and performed a Levitating charm on Nott as Ernie started to push Nott in the air as if he were riding on an invisible cart.

"Everyone to the Whomping Willow!" Neville waved his arm as he lead the group to the Entrance Hall.

Hermione could only hope Harry was faring better than they were.

Harry ducked as he felt a spell sizzle over his shoulder. A couple of Death Eaters were patrolling the walls of Hogwarts and saw him immediately after he lifted off. Harry navigated through the tower, using them as cover as he avoided curse after curse. Harry narrowly dodged a green light as he flew under an archway. Although he could have immediately bolted across the lake, he needed to provide a distraction for the Death Eaters.

He pulled his broom up, gaining altitude as the Death Eater's curses turned more inaccurate the higher he went. Harry paused as he felt the Firebolt begin to reach it's altitude limits. Looking down, Harry could see three blurs zooming up towards him. The Death Eaters were giving chase on broom.

"Let's see how many of you were on the House team," Harry muttered as he pointed his broom down, straight into the heart of the flying Death Eaters.

Harry dodged and barrel rolled away from a series of curses as he hurtled through the air to the Death Eaters. Harry pointed out his broom directly at one of the Death Eaters, avoiding a spell along the way. At the last second, he veered away from the Death Eater and snaked around another of the Death Eaters, causing massive confusion amongst them. As Harry flew figure eights around the Death Eaters, he caused at least one of them to hit another with a curse. Harry caught a Death Eater falling out of the sky out of the corner of his eye and smiled with grim satisfaction.

One down. Two to go.

Harry pointed his broom down and felt the Death Eaters follow him as they vertically raced along the walls of the castle. Harry kept weaving in and out, making sure not to give them an easy target as he approached maximum speed. He gave a quick look over his shoulder to see the Death Eaters following him, their wands still trained on him. As they approached the ground, Harry pulled his broom up sharply and leveled almost flat against the ground. A sick thud echoed behind him and Harry did not need to look back to know that one of the Death Eaters had smashed against the ground.

Two down.

At this point, Harry started to speed towards the lake, noting that a couple more Death Eaters fired harmless spells at him from the ground. They would never hit him at the speed he was flying. Harry barrel rolled to avoid a curse from the last flying Death Eater as he breached the shore of the lake. Skimming the water, Harry weaved to kick up some water and block the Death Eater's vision for a moment.

The Death Eater anticipated this movement and grazed Harry's shoulder with a Dark cutting curse. Harry hissed as he felt the burn on his shoulder. Not bothering to look at the wound, Harry immediately pulled up on his broom and did a complete one eighty in the air and started flying straight towards the Death Eater.

Harry was angry that he let the Death Eater hit him and he was going to let this particular fool know it. He weaved slightly to avoid a spell but kept on course. They approached each other faster and faster, their brooms on an unstoppable course to collide against each other. At the very last moment, Harry flipped over so he was underneath the Death Eater. He simultaneously pulled out his wand during the flip and blasted the Death Eater off his broom. Harry watched the Death Eater tumble into the water, outdone by a simple Fifth year student.

Harry stopped his broom and looked back at the castle. Stray spells were being fired at him, but he was too far away to be bothered. More Death Eaters were rising to the air on their brooms. Harry knew he had done his part and could only hope that the others escaped.

"Good luck guys," Harry muttered to himself as he turned and sped towards Hogsmeade. He felt the magic shudder around him as he passed the magical barrier that defended Hogwarts.

Hermione scrambled behind Neville as they exchanged fire with some of the Death Eaters. Several students were already hit and remained on the ground. Hermione could only hope that they were not victims of the Killing curse.

"Bombarda!"

Hermione aimed at the rafters, taking a cue from Harry's early battles. Several portions of the wall exploded over their heads, causing large chunks of rubble to fall from the sky. Hermione yelled as she felt a Stinging Hex hit her ankle. Although it was most probably friendly fire (Death Eaters would not use such an elementary curse), Hermione fired back with renewed energy as she struggled to fight off the Death Eaters.

Neville was taking down Death Eaters single handedly, leaping through the air and hitting Death Eaters with all sorts of spells. The Death Eaters seemed reluctant to hit him with any deadly curses and kept trying to hit him with Stunners. Hermione watched some of the Stunners literally bend around Neville as he kept fighting.

"No, not the runes!" one of the female Death Eaters yelled.

Hermione looked at where the Death Eater was yelling at and saw a series of glowing runes surrounding the double doors of the Entrance Hall. Not knowing the exact consequences of her actions, she immediately pointed her wand at the runes and yelled out more spells.

"Bombarda Maxima!"

The runes erupted in a fiery blaze as Hermione watched the Death Eaters react rather negatively to this spell. Although Hermione did not quite know what just happened, anything that made the Death Eaters panic was fine with her. The fighting immediately stopped, however, when Voldemort strolled in.

He lifted his wand and circled it in the air. All of the students immediately froze, suspended in animation by Voldemort's curse.

Voldemort looked around, apparently seeking a particular target. Voldemort frowned, or at least construed his face into a frown, as he obviously did not find what or who he was looking for.

"Take all of them into the Great Hall," Voldemort ordered.

Hermione could only watch in horror, still frozen in mid-spell, as a Death Eater literally picked her up and carried her to the Great Hall.



Harry spotted the tell tale robes of the Aurors as he descended from the sky. He only just started his descent when the purple laser of the Flipendo spell almost hit his Firebolt.

"Hey!" Harry yelled, shaking his fist at them.

His shouts did nothing to stop the Aurors from firing at him again. Harry rolled and pushed his broom down, angry that the Aurors could not identify a target from the sky. Did he look like a Death Eater?

Swooping in low and fast, Harry dodged another spell and literally grabbed the wand from the hand of the Auror. Glaring menacingly at the supposed protectors of the public, Harry tossed the wand on the ground before leaping off his broom and marching to the group angrily.

"Good in the air that one," said a grizzly voice from behind him.

Harry turned around to see the real Mad-Eye Moody staring at him with a grim smile on his face. The ex-Auror did not wear the black robes of the Aurors but instead wore the green and grey garb most related to what the Ministry's Army wore.

"General Moody," the man with the magical eye stuck out his hand.

"Harry Potter. Student," Harry replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Let me go! I will break you in two! I don't care if you're an Auror!" Lily Potter shrieked as she fought through the Aurors to reach her son.

"Mum!" Harry yelled as he ran halfway to meet his mother in a bone crushing hug.

She was holding him tightly, murmuring something intelligible in his hair. Harry did not care if everyone saw him clutching his mother like he was still a baby. He held onto her, clutching her tightly. It was not long ago that he was stuck in Hogwarts with no way out. Another body smothered them tightly and Harry could feel the familiar arms of his father wrapping around both of them.

"You're alright, you're okay," James whispered.

The three Potters held onto each other tightly, not wishing to let go. The Aurors let them have their moment but itched to interrogate Harry. Harry continued to hold on to both his mother and his father as he took deep breathes to steady himself. He smiled at them as he pulled back, wiping small tears from his eyes as he took in the sight of his parents.

His mother still looked as beautiful when he left them after the break. Harry was delighted to see she was still wearing the earrings he bought her for Christmas. There were deep bags under her eyes as if she had not slept in quite a long time. Nevertheless, her vivid, green eyes were bright with happiness at the sight of her living son.

His father, on the other hand, looked terrible. His skin was pale and even though he was holding onto Harry, the shakes were visible in his hands. There were no bags under his eyes; instead his eyes looked to be literally sunken in his sockets, making them look even deeper set in his skull. His brown eyes looked dead and his breath was raspy even when he was standing still.

"Dad, are you okay?" Harry asked in concern.

"Me? Harry, I'm fine. Are you okay? How are you? Are you hurt?" the flurry of questions came from both parents as they both started to fuss over Harry's well-being.

"Harry, you're hurt!" Lily peeled back a tear of his robes on Harry's shoulder to inspect the wound.

Apparently, Lily's statement spurred the Aurors into action as they closed in around the family and immediately started clamoring for Harry to receive medical attention. Harry pushed them off, though the wound did sting a bit, not wanting the fuss of the Aurors that tried to shoot him down from the sky. Eventually, even Lily allowed them to look at the wound for her son's own health. As the mediwizard went to work on Harry's wound, applying several salves and balms, the Aurors started to quiz Harry.

"Wait!" Harry yelled amidst all the questions, "The Honeydukes cellar! That's where they're all going. You have to go there!"

"Owen, take the group and go get them," Moody barked. One of the soldiers immediately turned about and started towards Honeydukes. The Aurors looked slightly put out that they were being excluded from this operation.

Harry smiled at his parents, excitedly telling them the exact plan of their escape from Hogwarts. As Owen and the other soldiers returned though, the smile was wiped off of Harry's face as he spotted only ten of his classmates with them. He jumped up, the mediwizard complaining all the while, and ran towards the other students.

"Su Li, what happened!" Harry asked the Ravenclaw girl.

"I don't know," she said sadly, "One minute we're all climbing through. The next minute the passage closed behind us, buried in rubble! Poor Justin got hit by one of the rocks and we had to levitate him all the way here."

"Harry! Lavender and Padma are still in there! They're all still in there!" Parvati shrieked, tears streaming down her face.

Harry was at a loss as he turned back to the castle, knowing that Neville, Hermione, and all of his friends were stuck in the castle. Behind him, he heard more voices pipe up.

"Potter!" Pansy yelled, trying to break through the crowd, "Potter! I think I know what happened."

"Parkinson?" Moody growled.

"She's okay," Harry hushed the General, much to the General's surprise.

"What - what happened?"

"Well," Pansy suddenly halted but continued, "As I was climbing through, I noticed these symbols next to the statue. I was caught up in trying to escape at the time, but it occurred to me that I've seen those symbols before."

"What were those symbols missy?" Moody interrogated her, his eye whizzing around his head.

"They're four red triangles," Pansy gulped.

"Blast! Common Death Eater trap. They can be triggered at any time and cause some big explosions. The nastier ones leave permanent damage. That's how I got my leg," Moody patted his wooden leg.

"And you knew!" Harry accused her.

"I didn't know at the time!" Pansy defended herself.. She looked genuinely upset, an expression Harry had never seen on her.

"All of my friends are stuck in there too! What do you think the Dark Lord will do when he finds out we were shacking up with you lot the whole time!" Pansy yelled at him.

Harry froze, realizing that all of the Slytherin students would most certainly feel the wrath of You-Know-Who. A chill ran down his spine as he finally grasped the direness of the situation. His throat was parched as he turned to his parents, looking at them desperately.

"Wait!" Harry suddenly thrust his hand into his jacket and pulled out the Marauder's Map. James gasped aloud as he saw it, immediately recognizing it. Though Harry had many questions for James, he held it back as he scanned the Map. He gasped when he found his target.

Almost all of the dots were located in the Great Hall.

Hermione was shaking, that much was for certain. All of the students were kneeling in front of the High Table, the Death Eaters behind them with their wands trained on their heads. One of the Death Eaters off to the side, MacNair she thought, was holding all of their wands in a bag. Voldemort was regarding them silently as if he were choosing a target. Hermione was fidgeting with her robes, hoping that the Death Eaters mistook her slight movement as anxiety.

"Peter," Voldemort said softly.

Peter Pettigrew stood and walked over to Voldemort. He retrieved something that Hermione could not see from Voldemort's side. Pettigrew walked down the line of students until he reached Neville. Neville looked up at him defiantly, singes burning the ends of his

hair as he dared the former Gryffindor to attack him. Pettigrew shakily jammed the Sorting Hat on Neville's head.

Hermione looked at Pettigrew in confusion. Why would Voldemort order Peter to put the Sorting Hat on Neville's head? It made no sense. Hermione wracked her brain for the possible reasons as she kept fidgeting with her robes. The Hall was deathly silent as all eyes were glued to Neville Longbottom. The Hat seemed to take its time on his head but after an undetermined amount of time, Voldemort impatiently signaled Peter to take the Hat off his head.

It occurred to Hermione what Voldemort wanted from Neville. He wanted the sword. But why? Voldemort walked up to Neville and leaned down so he was eye to eye with the boy. Neville did not flinch, meeting Voldemort's red eyes evenly.

"What did the Hat tell you, Longbottom?"

Neville did not answer, his lip shaking as he kept his chin up defiantly.

"No?" Voldemort whispered after Neville continued to remain silent.

"Crucio."

Hermione involuntarily yelled as Voldemort hit Neville with the Unforgivable. Neville twisted and turned, moaning out loud as waves pain pulsed through his body. After a couple of seconds, Voldemort lifted the spell. Neville was panting but pushed his body off the ground and raised his chin again in defiance.

"Of course," Voldemort seemed to have expected Neville's obtrusiveness.

"I could just invade your mind as easily as I usually do, Longbottom. But I suspect the Hat told you nothing. But what if..."

Voldemort started to walk down the line. Hermione shivered as he passed by her. She kept her head down, not daring to meet the master Legilimens eyes. She could hear Voldemort settle on a person to her right. Twisting her head sideways, Hermione felt a chill of fear run through her as Voldemort eyed Ron. Ron kept his head

down and his jaw tight as he refused to acknowledge the terror known as Voldemort.

"Crucio."

Ron screamed, his voice echoing through the halls as Voldemort applied the torture curse on Neville's best friend. Hermione could dimly hear Neville yelling for Voldemort to stop. Hermione kept fidgeting, hoping the Death Eaters did not notice her movement as she attempted to block out Ron's hoarse screams. Finally, she was able to maneuver the Mirror inside her robes so that it dropped quietly near her knee. Shielded by her robes, the Mirror faced Hermione's head and could hopefully transmit and receive this entire encounter.

She could only hope that Ginny or someone else was on the other end.

"We have to go back!"

Harry was jumping up and down anxiously once he realized all of his friends were inside the castle with You-Know-Who. Unfortunately, Dumbledore had come to ruin Harry's hopes.

"We can't break through the defenses of Hogwarts," Dumbledore said sadly.

"What's up in your office, Professor? You have to be able to do something about it!" Harry implored.

"I'm afraid, I can't. I checked once I received word that Tom entered the castle. It seems as if he has changed the ruins to not allow anyone inside the castle defenses," Dumbledore continued.

"There has to be something you can do! Can't you just break down the defenses? You've been Headmaster forever," Harry was practically begging on his knees at this point.

"The Founders' magic is stronger than mines, Harry. We have to think of something else," Dumbledore tried to empathize with the boy, but Harry was having none of it.

"I can get back in! If I get out, I can back in!"

Dumbledore sighed, "That's not how it works, Mr. Potter."

"Damn it, you can't just STAND HERE!"

The window glass from a nearby store exploded as Harry raged at the Headmaster. The Aurors had their wands out but found no one to hex or curse. Lily seemed to realize that Harry was quickly losing control and placed a calming hand on her son's shoulder.

"Harry, we're going to do something about it."

Harry turned to his mother. Tears were stinging his eyes but he was not actually crying. It was simply pure emotion.

"We have to get back, Mum. You don't understand, we have to get back," Harry insisted.

"I know, I know," Lily stroked his hair softly.

"Dumbledore," James said softly, "Maybe Harry is right."

"I'm not following, James," Dumbledore frowned.

"Do you know exactly which runes Riddle changed? Perhaps the castle would recognize Harry's magic since he was in there when the runes changed. Perhaps Harry can re-enter through the defenses and destroy the necessary runes to allow us access," James offered.

"I'll do it," Harry looked thankfully at James, "Anything, I'll do it."

"It's not that simple, Harry. If your father is wrong," Dumbledore looked disappointedly at James, "You could be killed if the defenses are still standing."

"Well, I'd rather die trying than just wait around and let my friends die in there with fucking You-Know-Who!"

Another glass window shattered as waves of magic poured off Harry. No one admonished the boy for cursing at the Headmaster as the Aurors suddenly had their wands trained on him. James noticed this

action and immediately stood in front of Harry, spreading his arms out to block any attacks.

"Put your wands down! You're aiming at the wrong person," James ordered.

"Put it down, lads. The boy ain't gonna hurt ya," Moody ordered, looking intriguingly at Harry.

"Harry we can't just -"

Dumbledore started but was interrupted by one of Moody's soldiers running towards the group with a package in his hand, yelling for Moody all the while.

"Settle yourself, boy! What's this about?" Moody barked.

"It's from the - Weasley girl - important - package," the soldier wheezed out in between gasps.

"The mirror! Why doesn't Ginny have it?" Harry immediately tore off the brown package wrapping.

"She was trying to raise you but all she could hear was spell fire. She sent it over here since her region is under attack," the delivery boy said.

Harry could barely spare a second's thought for Ginny's safety as he opened the package to find Hermione's face reflecting in the mirror. She was staring slightly off into the distance, her expression pained and fearful. Harry looked at her, his hand tracing her face on the mirror.

"Harry, what is it?" Lily asked.

"Shhhhhh..." Harry tucked the Mirror in his jacket, hoping that his Mom's voice did not reach to the Mirror.

He quietly whispered to everyone, "Hermione has the other end of the two-way mirror. We can't speak too loud or else they'll hear us on the other side."



"The two-way..." James muttered, his eyes sliding off into the distance, a distant memory echoing in his head.

"Wasn't it yours, Dad?"

"What? Oh - yes - me and Sirius used it..." James trailed off.

"Wait. Everyone quiet," Harry put a hand to his lips as he lifted to the Mirror to his ear, "I hear something on the other side."

Hermione winced as Voldemort finally lifted the curse on Ron. Ron underwent the Crucio two more times before finally passing out from the pain. She hoped that Ron was alright and not permanently damaged in any way. Voldemort looked thoughtfully at Ron and then stared back at a mutinous Neville.

"No? You train your friends well, Longbottom. We're not so different, you and I."

"I'm nothing like you," Neville hissed.

"No, no, you're really not. Quite pathetic actually," Voldemort walked back towards Neville and pushed his finger against Neville's scar.

"How can an insolent boy like you be predicted to defeat me? I can enter your mind as I please. You will never be able to defeat me," Voldemort made a show of tracing Neville's scar.

"Predicted?" Neville grit his teeth.

"Oh so you don't know? You don't know, indeed," Voldemort looked delighted, "The old fool has always like to meddle."

Hermione was still considering what Voldemort said when a Death Eater dragged an unconscious Lucius Malfoy into the Great Hall.

"We found him near the triggered passageway," the masked Death Eater said as he tossed Lucius to the ground.

"Excellent. We can put on a bit of a show for the kids," Voldemort tapped his wand on Lucius' head and awoke the man. Lucius looked groggy from being hit by several Stunners but wobbled to his feet nonetheless.

"Don't worry, Lucius. I gave you my own version of a Pepper-Up charm. You'll be able to do this," Voldemort mocked him.

"Let us reunite the father with his son," Voldemort nodded to a masked Death Eater.

The Death Eater dragged Draco to his feet and frog marched the boy so that he kneeled in front of Voldemort. Voldemort looked down at him and then back at a sickly looking Lucius.

"You really do look astonishingly alike. If only I had the other set of father/son twins here..." Voldemort trailed off.

Hermione froze as she realized who Voldemort was talking about. She hesitantly looked down at the mirror and barely held her happiness to herself when she saw Harry's face looking at her. As discretely as she could, Hermione looked down at the mirror and slowly shook her head back and forth. After a few of these head shakes, Hermione stopped, hoping none of the Death Eaters noticed.

"Why'd she shake her head? I missed what You-Know-Who said. I couldn't hear him," Harry told his parents, Dumbledore, and the Aurors.

"It could indicate anything," Moody hypothesized, "Maybe she's telling us it isn't safe? She could also be responding to something Voldemort said. She could also be trying to inform us that the defenses are still up. There's a myriad of things it could be."

"Parchment! Quill!" James summoned the two bits of equipment as an idea struck him.

"Harry, draw out yes or no questions. Get Hermione to answer them!" James ordered him.

"Brilliant, Dad," Harry said as he jotted down his first question.

Is everyone okay?

Hermione slowly nodded, keeping an eye out for any wary Death Eaters while she kept one ear tuned into Voldemort's monologue.

"Lucius Malfoy. As punishment for failing to kill your wife, you must complete the task by killing her son. Do you accept this punishment?" Voldemort asked, his voice making it clear there was only one answer. Voldemort wished to make an example out of Lucius.

Is You-Know-Who keeping all of you in the Great Hall?

Hermione discretely nodded again.

"Yes, my Lord," Lucius said in a shaky voice. Several of the other Death Eaters snickered at the waver in Malfoy's voice.

"Settle," Voldemort smiled as he shushed the Death Eaters, "Let's have it then Lucius."

Lucius walked up to the High Table and stood over his son, pointing his wand at him. Voldemort watched, his face showing a rare amount of amusement at Lucius' predicament. Hermione noted that Voldemort seemed to enjoy the game.

"What are you waiting for, Lucius?" Voldemort continued to grow happier the longer Lucius delayed.

Are the defenses still up?

Hermione frowned, trying to indicate that she did not know the answer to the question. She saw Harry disappear and could see a brief glance of Dumbledore as the older wizard started writing on the parchment.

"Why the delay, Lucius?" Voldemort was now standing beside Lucius as they stared at Draco. Draco was strangely still, his head tucked against his chest. It looked as if he was not even acknowledge his father or the Dark Lord.

Are there glowing runes in the Entrance Hall?

Hermione recognized the neat scrawl of the Headmaster. There were runes in the Entrance Hall; the key word being 'were.' Hermione decided that 'no' would be the most appropriate answer since the runes were now gone. She slowly shook her head again.

"Kill your son, Lucius," Voldemort egged him on.

Harry had disappeared from the mirror and Hermione looked at it confusedly. Someone else was about to appear in the mirror, but Hermione could not wait around to find out as someone immediately hauled her to her feet. She yelped as the Death Eater squeezed her arm tightly and smashed his foot against the mirror. Hermione groaned, bemoaning the loss.

"Bates, what's the meaning of this?" Voldemort was interrupted from his little game.

"She had a two-way mirror, my Lord. She was communicating with someone," Bates was still holding Hermione tightly by her arm.

Voldemort looked mildly surprised as he appraised the Muggle-born witch. As he started to speak, another Death Eater cut him off. Hermione could recognize her as the infamous Bellatrix Lestrange. She was running into the Great Hall with an angry look on her face.

"My Lord! The runes can not be fixed! The defenses are down!" Bellatrix yelled.

Voldemort's demeanor immediately changed from tortuously playful to decidedly murderous.

Harry was already running to his Firebolt once he realized that the defenses were down. He was almost there but was pulled back by someone's arm.

"Dad! Let go! I can get there faster than anyone else!" Harry tried to fight off James, but James held tight, even in his weakened state.

"Harry, wait for us to come with you. We're organizing a force and moving in right away," James tried to stop him.

"They might be dead by the time we get there. I need to leave now! Every second I waste is another second they might die!" Harry kept trying to tear himself away, but James held strong.

"Harry, you're not ready for this. Please listen to me," James implored.

"Dad, I'm ready. Please," Harry stared into James' eyes, trying to channel his emotions through just one look.

James met his stare for a moment and did not reply. He could only look into the vivid green eyes as if he were hypnotized by its glance. Harry frowned as James fell silent.

"Dad...please," Harry slowly pried his father's hands off of his upper arm.

James released him and looked at Harry, blinking back tears all the while. He nodded to Harry as tears fell from his eyes.

"Go, Harry."

Harry nodded thankfully at him before mounting his broom and flying off to Hogwarts. Lily ran up behind him, her voice shrill as she yelled at James.

"Why'd you let him go? Why didn't you stop him?" she yelled.

"He's ready," James simply replied.

"That's not for you to decide! James, we have to go after him!" Lily shed her regular robes in favor of a spare pair of Auror combat robes. She shook him on the shoulder, but James remained rooted to the spot, staring at the disappearing form of Harry.

"James, we have to go - ugggh - I'll get us a broom!" Lily ran off to retrieve a broom from the assembling team of Aurors and soldiers. All of the forces were moving in now that they knew the Hogwarts defenses were down. Dumbledore had already disappeared right after Harry. James was still lost in a world of his own as Lily returned with a broom.

"James, I have the broom. Are you healthy enough to do this?" Lily asked as she mounted the broom.

James nodded, mounting the broom behind her as he held on tight while they lifted off the ground.

A thousand thoughts ran through Harry's mind as he flew over the Hogwarts lake. It was as if time were moving in slow motion. He

could feel the ripple of the water at his feet as he glided over the unusually calm lake. The castle was growing bigger and bigger as Harry flew at maximum speed to Hogwarts, desperate to reach his friends before anything malicious happened to them.

Could he stop Bates in time? He already knew the tattooed man was as savage as any Death Eater could possibly be. It sickened him that the lunatic's hands were on Hermione. It sickened him that this sick bastard held Hermione hostage. Anger fueled through him as he felt his own magic radiating from him.

It seemed as if the adrenaline had forced all of his magic to the surface. Harry felt stronger; he could feel the magic rippling through his body. Though he knew he was nowhere near strong enough to take out the entire Death Eater forces, he could at least provide enough of a distraction until the cavalry came. With the defenses down, they would not be long after Harry.

The flight to the castle seemed to take forever in Harry's mind even though it lasted only about thirty seconds. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins as he attempted to formulate a basic plan in his head. He needed to distract them long enough for the rest of the forces to reach Hogwarts. None of them had a broom as fast as the Firebolt so they would definitely be just a couple of minutes behind him. Damn the 'No Apparation in Hogwarts' rule.

There was only one option; straight through the Great Hall windows.

"My Lord, we must leave! The Aurors and Dumbledore are on the way!" Bellatrix implored for her Master to leave Hogwarts.

"No," Voldemort hissed, "We must return with the sword. To return without it would be catastrophic."

"But if Longbottom can't summon the sword from the hat, who can?"

"Longbottom's mind has been scarred from my invasions. The Hat will no longer recognize him as a true Gryffindor. From my research, there is only one other person that can summon the sword from the hat," Voldemort ordered several Death Eaters to take defensive positions along the castle as he explained the situation to Bellatrix.

"Who?"

"The Potter boy."

Harry hurtled through the air as he approached the castle. He saw some Death Eaters moving to engage him, but Harry was moving too quickly for them to catch him. He pointed his wand at the glass windows along the top of the Great Hall.

"Reducto!"

The windows broke apart as Harry turned his body so he could fit within the narrow window. Looking down, Harry could see the Death Eaters and the rest of the students looking up at him in surprise. Slightly startled, Harry started to aim spells at all of the Death Eaters, flying in a scattered, random pattern all the while.

"Alive! I need him alive!" Voldemort yelled as he watched the Potter boy weave and dodge various spells.

The restrictions bottled the Death Eaters from using their more effective Dark curses. Potter was avoiding them admirably and even Voldemort was slightly surprised at the ease of which the boy avoided the curses. Voldemort aimed his wand at him and a large engulfing net flew up into the air where the boy's trajectory would take him.

Harry saw the net one second too late and sent a cutting spell towards it to try to break it apart. He cut off a part of the net but could only sever a part of it. The net caught him and the Firebolt, stopping his momentum and forcing him to tumble out of the air.

"Arresto Momentum."

Voldemort, himself, performed the spell to stop Harry from hitting the ground. Harry was still wrestling within the net but the net seemed to close tighter and tighter around him. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Peter Pettigrew approaching him with the Sorting Hat in his hand. For a moment, confusion struck him as he regarded the Hat weirdly.

Peter tore off the constricting net with his silver hand and hauled Harry to his feet, keeping a tight grip around his neck. Pettigrew

barely hesitated as he smashed the Hat on top of Harry's head. Harry struggled, but Pettigrew's silver hand was too strong.

"Harry, don't -" Hermione yelled at him, but Bates immediately slapped her in the face.

"Let her go!" Harry yelled, his vision obstructed by the Hat.

Need to get free. Need to help them.

The thoughts ran through Harry's head as he continued to struggle with Pettigrew. Harry suddenly felt something heavy fall on the top of his head. Pettigrew must have felt the weight difference as well as his hand slightly slipped around Harry's throat. Harry used the slight slip to his advantage as he pulled the Hat off his head to find a sword in his hand. In one movement he used the sword to cut off the silver arm that Peter was using to hold him. Peter shrieked in agony as he lost yet another offending limb.

Harry looked up to see Voldemort smiling at him.



October 30, 1981 - Morning

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have the power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

Stupid prophecy.

Harry James Potter opened his eyes, blinking them rapidly; his eyes unused to the bright ultraviolet rays of the sun. Shielding his glasses from the sun, he finally regained his footing as he realized he was standing in the middle of an empty park. He inhaled deeply, his lungs accepting a blast of fresh air; untainted by smoke or ash or death. He fell to the ground, clutching the green grass with his fists. Laying his cheek against the ground, he rubbed against the grass softly, a smile adorning his face for the first time in ages.

"Green grass," he murmured, still rubbing his face softly against the dirt.

He suddenly snapped up, standing alert as if he were an animal that suddenly felt the presence of a predator. His eyes narrowed as he surveyed his surroundings. There were no people around him and it was eerily quiet. Had it not worked? Had everything failed?

Harry sprinted towards a relatively tall hill, the incline forcing his legs to work overtime as he desperately tried to reach the top. He heaved deep breathes as he reached the top, placing his hands on his knees as he tried to regain his composure for a moment. He did not raise his head, fearing the absolute worse. After a moment, he slowly raised his head inch by inch as he took in his surroundings.

Harry smiled and cheered to himself as he saw an untainted sky. All around him, he could see for ages and ages, unobstructed by the tower that haunted his nightmares. Normal people were driving around automobiles, attending classes, and shopping for new clothes. Off in the distance, he could see the tell tale buildings of downtown London. Harry cheered, spinning around with his arms in the air.

His heart was filled with joy at the sight of an unblemished land; unscarred by war and death. Tears seeped out of the corners of his eyes as he unabashedly cried for joy. He fell to his knees, his hands still raised in the air as he wept for minutes. A smile was glued on his face, so happy that his plan had finally worked. Yet there were still things to do.

"You have work to do, Harry," he said to himself.

Harry James Potter walked into a store, the slight ringing of a bell indicating there was a new customer. He smiled gently at an exiting shopper, careful to keep his hat pulled low on his head. He entered the Muggle store with one purpose and one purpose only. Carefully making his way to the newspaper stand, he casually picked one up and read the date.

October 30, 1981.

If he bothered to read past the date, he would have seen reports of strange, unexplained occurrences all around the British countryside. But Harry did not care for the main article or the editorials or the obituaries; he only cared for the date printed at the top of the paper. Harry had to make sure the date was true. Too many times he had dreamt of this exact situation and woken up to return to the nightmare of reality. He approached the store clerk with an apple in his hand, a small purchase used to buy the clerk's trust.

"Hello, sir, will that be all?" the man with a fat belly asked kindly.

"Yes," Harry said with a tight smile.

"Almost Halloween isn't it?" Harry asked as casually as he could.

"Wouldn't you know it! It just creeps onto me. The 31st is tomorrow already. Looks like some people have got a head start on it by all the weird things happening about," the store clerk amicably spoke as he registered Harry's purchase.

"Thank you," Harry said softly as he exited the store, taking a bite of the apple and relishing its sinful taste.

He turned into an unused alley as he clutched the newspaper in his hand. It had worked! He pinched himself one more time to make sure that this world was real and not a figment of his imagination. The combination of the paper and the store clerk confirming the date cemented the fact that Harry's plan had worked. It was time to execute the second phase of said plan. Harry pulled out his wand and gave a small twirl. Only a small pop indicated that Harry Apparated away from the spot.

Finding Peter Pettigrew was easy enough. A coward of the highest degree, Pettigrew spent most of his time at a local pub on the corner of Knockturn Alley. It was in this mangy pub that Harry Potter found his father's friend, talking to some rather unsavory characters as he sipped on a pint of frosty, red ale. He looked terrible even at a younger age; the portly belly, the pointy nose, and the buck teeth only enhancing his features as a disgusting piece of vermin. Harry sat in one corner of the pub, his hood pulled low over his head as he watch Pettigrew carefully.

How easy it would have been just to kill the putrid piece of vermin and rid the world of his abominable existence. If Harry killed Peter, would Voldemort never find the Potters? If he never found the Potters, what lengths would he go to find the Longbottoms? The questions bounced around Harry's head as he sipped on a rather foul tasting Firewhiskey. Butterbeer was out of the question; he needed to fit in the crowd and Butterbeer was much too weak for the crowd at this particular pub.

Nonetheless, the prophecy must be fulfilled. Voldemort would have to mark his equal soon or else the world would have to deal with his existence for more years to come. Harry needed to change the boy who would be marked. His gut stirred at the thought of inflicting Neville Longbottom, his former friend, with the burden of being the Boy-Who-Lived. Neville was his former friend not because they had a falling out but because he had been killed by Bellatrix Lestrange not so long ago. Harry shook his head, trying to block out Neville's screams in his head. He had a job to do.

Pettigrew paid his tab and pulled on his coat to leave. He sneered and said something to his compatriot before grabbing a piece of bread and leaving the pub. How rat-like he looked just now, nibbling on a piece of bread as he navigated the sewer-infested streets of Knockturn Alley. Harry followed him, careful not to be noticed; not

that Peter would ever notice anything out of his own existence. As Peter rounded an alley to presumably find a shortcut, Harry pounced on him.

Grabbing him roughly by the back of his robes, Harry disarmed him and shoved him up against the wall, careful not to let Peter see his face. Deepening his voice was not too difficult as all the ash and smoke had scarred his throat and lungs to some degree. In a raspy voice, Harry spoke into Peter's ear, once again careful not to make sure the Gryffindor saw his face.

"I have a message, Peter. It's from the Dark Lord," Harry hissed into the other man's ear.

"Wha - wha - what is it?" Peter stuttered, his face scrunched against the hard pavement of the alley.

"He wishes for you to tell me of the Potter's location. He is about to strike on those who defy him."

"I can't tell you that!" Peter yelled as Harry shoved his wand into the other man's neck.

"The Dark Lord wishes it so. Do you want to feel his wrath? The pain of the Crucio?" Harry made sure to enunciate the last word.

"No - no!" Peter gasped, "I'll tell you."

Peter ratted out the location immediately. Harry was disgusted at the relative simplicity of the task. Was Peter really that easy to intimidate? How could he have ever possibly been a Gryffindor of any nature? It seems as if even the Sorting Hat makes mistakes every now and then.

"Make sure not to tell the Dark Lord of this conversation. He will not want to hear that you hesitated when faced with a direct order," Harry had to cover his tracks.

"I won't tell him this happened," Peter whimpered.

"Take care, Peter. We shall see each other again; in this life or the next," Harry Disapparated with a pop.

"What? What does that mean?" Peter whirled around once he felt the pressure of the wand ease from his neck. When he turned, there was no one in the alley but himself.

October 31, 1981 - Late Afternoon

Harry found Godric's Hollow with relative ease. He had visited it previously; or was it in the future? Time travel logic was never Harry's strong suit. He always had to rely on Hermione to explain to him the complexities of time flow and open and closed loops and the grandfather paradox. But Hermione was gone. Ron was gone. Everyone was gone. In the end, Harry was the only one left.

"It won't end that way. Not this time," Harry whispered to himself as he sat in the bush, masterfully Disillusioned.

There was a slight jingle from inside and Harry peeked through the window, careful not to stand too much lest he reveal himself to the Potters. Inside, James Potter strolled through the kitchen and tossed baby Harry into the air. Baby Harry laughed as he felt gravity pull him back down his father's arms, laughing gaily all the while. James spun him in a circle, imitating the vrooming noise most usually associated with Muggle airplanes. Baby Harry looked giddy, clearly reveling in the flying experience. James smiled at him as he slowed down and pulled Harry into his arms, pinching his nose affectionately.

"Dad," Harry from the outside whispered, his hand reaching out to touch the window.

He held his finger out so that it looked like he was touching his father's face. One single finger traced the profile of his father's head, carefully memorizing the figure. Splaying his fingers out, Harry pressed it against the window before realizing what he was doing. He pulled his hand back as if it were shocked. He quickly turned away from the window and buried his head in his hands.

"What am I doing? Can I do this? Can I possibly go through with this?" Harry muttered to himself, rocking back and forth.

The plan seemed simple enough when Harry formulated it at the time. Traveling back in time and killing Voldemort was out of the question. The whole reason he was traveling back in the first place

was he was unable to defeat Voldemort in his timeline. Harry doubted it would be any easier when Voldemort was at the height of his power.

But what if he were to slightly alter the course of events? How many things would change? Harry knew that changing too much would lead to a radical turn of events he could not possibly predict. He needed to keep the incident isolated. The more he changed at the origin, the more the final picture would change. Hermione had explained it to him in a way he would understand.

They were sitting near a pond; one of the few times they found peace from the death and ash. Skipping rocks idly across the surface of the pond, Harry had brought his plan to her for the first time. He remembered that she looked at him curiously, not dismissing it immediately. The longer she thought and the longer they conversed, the more she bought into the idea. If anyone could execute this plan, it would be Hermione; the brightest witch of her age.

Picking up a couple of pebbles, she attempted to explain her theory on how his plan would work. There was a yellow pond lily floating a couple meters off shore. Hermione pointed it out and said that it represented the future. Carefully taking a rather large pebble, she dropped it into the lake. She told him to watch the ripples and watch how it affected the yellow lily. The yellow lily moved slightly, not too much but enough to know that it was indeed in a different location. Hermione explained to him that this effect is what they needed to achieve. She also explained that if they only dropped one pebble into the pond, they could even possibly predict where the lily would travel.

Then she took the rest of the pebbles in her arms and threw them into the air, scattering them in different places all over the pond. There were several ripples bouncing against each other and reverberating through the water. Harry watched as the lily sloshed about, bouncing against the several waves as it struggled to return to equilibrium. Hermione pointed out that this approach was severely unpredictable and potentially volatile as the lily had almost tipped over at numerous points. It was much safer for Harry to drop one pebble into the pond; Harry agreed with her. That was one of the last times he ever saw Hermione alive.

Harry planned on dropping two pebbles.

The first pebble was easy enough and almost completed. Although Harry already knew where the Potters were located, he needed Peter to tell him since they were technically still under the Fidelius. Now that Harry was here, he could easily help them escape from Voldemort before he arrived at Godric's Hollow thus altering the course of events. Though it was a large pebble, a rock even, Harry knew that once Voldemort found Godric's Hollow empty, he would immediately move for the Longbottoms.

Although Harry longed to protect baby Neville from such an enormous burden, the prophecy must be fulfilled. He could not save everyone; not this time. Once upon a time, Harry would go to all lengths to make sure everyone survived the encounter. Harry would fight through and create a scenario where all parties interested would live and Voldemort would die. Ironically, it was Snape who told Harry his "No-Lose" attitude would be his downfall. Snape's vision indeed came true as one by one, all of Harry's friends died.

It was the second pebble which proved problematic.

The second pebble was dangerous and rife with terrible consequences. The very thought of it sickened Harry so much that he had to lean down and press his face against the grass to prevent himself from throwing up. The second pebble was a gamble to the maximum proportions but the pay-off would be enormous. It would be the key to defeating Voldemort.

But at what cost?

Harry picked his head up and poked his head inside as he heard more voices. Lily walked downstairs, smiling at her husband and giving him a quick peck on the cheek before picking up baby Harry and walking him over to the table. She fed him lovingly, dabbing the corners of his mouth as food spilled from his lips. James laughed as he pretended to fly Harry's food into his mouth with a spoon handle carved into a miniature broomstick. Baby Harry flapped his arms, enjoying the attention of both of his parents. The sight broke older Harry's heart and drove him to complete the mission. It must be done, for baby Harry's sake.

Harry checked his watch, noting that Voldemort would arrive once the sun set on the horizon. He planted himself by the window, watching and biding his time until the moment arrived. Lily picked up Harry to presumably bring him to his crib for a slight nap. James nodded as Lily said something to him, blowing her a kiss as she walked up the stairs with his child. James set about cleaning the various kitchen equipment, humming a jaunty tune all the while.

James never saw Harry Potter stun him from behind.

Harry stepped to him quickly, making sure his father's body did not hit the ground lest he make too much noise. He stayed there for a moment, observing his father's face. They were truly look-alikes besides Harry's violently green eyes. They were almost the same age despite Harry's time traveling exploits. He traced the outline of his face, brushing against his eyes as his fingers lingered there softly.

"I'm so sorry, Dad," Harry whispered.

Harry quickly and quietly bound up the stairs, listening to Lily whisper baby Harry a lullaby of sorts. Peeking around the corner, Harry could see Lily rocking her baby in her arms, murmuring softly to him as baby Harry dozed off to sleep, sucking on his thumb all the while. Harry watched with tears in his eyes as Lily laid baby Harry gently into the crib, brushing the fringe of his hair aside as she looked at her pride and joy.

Lily never saw Harry Potter stun her while her back was turned.

Harry rushed to her and let her drop softly, making sure to insert a pillow beneath her head so she did not feel uncomfortable even in her unconscious state. As soon as he was satisfied, he leaned over the crib and observed the sleeping baby. His forehead was unblemished and unscarred by a Horcrux. Picking him up gently, Harry cradled the baby in his arms carefully. He traversed downstairs where James Potter remained on the ground, stunned and immobile.

It was time to drop the second pebble.

Harry drew his wand and looked at baby Harry uncertainly. The baby was rousing, twisting about on the ground as he struggled to



pick himself up. The baby was still rubbing his eyes uncertainly as he acclimated to his surroundings. Older Harry immediately threw up his strongest Occlumency shields, effectively severing him from any emotional connection. It was the only way he could possibly accomplish this unholy task.

"Legilimens. Imperio."

Harry needed the first spell to force himself into the baby's mind. Baby Harry would never have the capacity or emotions to do what older Harry wanted him to do. It was an unexplored area of magic, casting Unforgivables on little children and invading their minds. The sensation was certainly different, easier but difficult at the same time. Entrance into baby Harry's mind was easy, deciphering it was decidedly less so. The baby's brain was still under construction and it took a while for Harry to make sort of the baby's head.

Curse Voldemort for improving his defense and attacking of the mind.

"Harry, take my wand."

Baby Harry crawled over to where older Harry had dropped his wand and picked it up, his eyes glazed over.

"Crawl over to your Dad."

Baby Harry did as he ordered, positioning himself so he was pointing a wand at his Dad.

Older Harry then started channeling magic and energy to the baby. There was no way that baby Harry could possibly perform this sort of magic on his own, no matter how powerful he was. He was only a baby and as such could not feel the emotion and power needed to pull off this particular curse. The darkest curse of them all.

There was a brief moment before Harry gave the order. He thought back to all the important moments in his previous life. He remembered meeting Ron on the train. Saving Hermione from the troll. Defeating the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. Rescuing Sirius with Hermione. Voldemort killing Cedric. Bellatrix killing Sirius. Voldemort raising the tower. All the deaths that followed. The never-ending ash that fell from the sky. Harry remembered all these things

just before he committed an act so foul, so terrible that no one could ever know lest the world be turned into the devil's playground. Summoning his hate of Voldemort and channeling it into baby Harry, older Harry ordered the unspeakable.

"Avada Kedavra."

The green spell looked strange coming from a baby's hand, but it was just as deadly. The green light struck James Potter's body, killing him on the spot. The only sick solace Harry could derive was that James was already stunned when he died. But the ordeal was not yet over.

"Nec possum tecum vivere, nec sine te."

Hermione got the idea from Voldemort or rather Voldemort's resurrection in the Riddle graveyard. They were exploring books related to blood magic just in case there was a spell to find a way to reverse Voldemort's resurrection. There were no spells that could defeat Voldemort through blood magic, but there were several other...interesting spells. One such spell detailed the splintering and strengthening of one person's magic through the act of murder.

However, this particular spell could only be used on one's own father. It roughly translated to, "I am able to live. I can live neither with you, nor without you."

Threads of magic started to flow from the dead body of James Potter. It latched onto baby Harry, swirling around him and filling his every orifice as it entered his body and strengthened his magical core. James Potter's magic was combining with baby Harry's magic to effectively strengthen the little child. However, the strength was not without consequences.

Immediately, a fragmented soul started ripping itself from baby Harry. It shrieked from his body, a ghostly spirit twisting into the air through baby Harry's mouth. It spun in the air, seeking a target to infest and destroy. Older Harry could feel it staring at him, assessing the situation.

"That's right. Me," older Harry growled.

The ghostly manifestation accepted the proposal and surged into older Harry's body, knocking the man into the ground. Older Harry could feel the Blood Magic worming its way into his body, establishing itself within his very magical core. The scar on his head glowed again, indicating the Dark magic had worked.

Harry finally lifted the curse on baby Harry. The baby dropped down the ground, his magic exhausted and drained. Older Harry continued to drain his own magic into the baby, hopefully keeping the baby alive and supplying him with his own set of magic. The transfusion of older Harry's own magic was another cog in this terrible machine.

Since baby Harry performed that spell after he killed his father, his true magic was split in half between himself and the older Harry. Older Harry had effectively hampered baby Harry's magic but for a purpose he knew would serve to be useful. When Voldemort would return - and yes he would return - he would not suspect this weakened Harry until the very end. Older Harry continued to channel his own magic into baby Harry, thus making him even stronger than he was supposed to be.

Once all the fragments of baby Harry's magic were rejoined, he would wield a magical force that rivaled all of the greatest wizards ever known. Older Harry held the other fragment within his body and the only way it could be separated from older Harry was through death.

Older Harry was exhausted as he brought baby Harry back up to his crib. Lily remained on the floor with a pillow beneath her head, sleeping peacefully as if nothing had happened. Dropping the baby off in the crib, Harry made his way downstairs to bury his dead father.

As his Occlumency shields dropped, the anguish and pain wracked Harry's body as he struggled to cope with the murder and abominated he had just committed. Gallons of tears fell down his cheeks as Harry dragged James on the floor, too tired to levitate him with his spent magic. He dug the grave by hand, making sure to bury James deep enough in the enchanted ground so no one would suspect to ever dig him up. He could not risk anyone finding the body and left no marker or trace that there was a dead body buried beneath Godric's Hollow.

Harry knew that what he just did was unforgivably awful. If he believed in hell, he would most surely be sent there and crowned king. But Harry knew the type of sacrifices he had to make. He once believed that as long as he did not sink down to Voldemort's level he would eventually defeat him. His life told a different story; one where Voldemort succeeded and killed everything around Harry until it broke his soul.

So he would carry the burden for everyone else. He would make sure no one would ever had to fall into the depths of madness that Voldemort casually reached into; he would make sure that he would be the only one to suffer this terrible fate.

"Lily, we have to go!" Harry shook her after he performed a Glamour charm on his eyes and his forehead so he looked exactly like James.

"James?" she muttered, "What happened?"

"Death Eaters attacked us, but I fought them off. We have to leave!" James insisted as he picked up Harry.

James picked up their belongings and helped Lily side-along to a safe location.

It did not take long for Lily to know something was wrong. This James did not respond like he should. This James did not answer the right questions. She knew he was an impostor as soon as he talked as she did not recognize the verbiage and pronunciation of his words.

Harry had to stun her repeatedly as he tried to explain the situation. Eventually, she believed the lie he created. He truthfully told her that he was Harry from the future; a dark future which could not be saved. He had returned in hopes in creating a better future for everyone.

The lie was in that the real James had been killed by Death Eaters. Harry could not reach Godric's Hollow in time to save James from that fate. The Death Eaters killed him and took his body as soon as Harry arrived. Overwhelmed by the situation, Lily took this news poorly. She collapsed onto the ground, crying and pounding against Harry's chest as he tried to soothe his mother. She cried out for her real husband, all the while holding onto her husband's murderer.

Harry bit his lip as he cried for completely different reasons than his mother.

They agreed not to tell anyone, the consequences too harmful for anyone to know. Harry's Occlumency shields were strong enough to keep Dumbledore at bay for he knew the old man would come looking once he realized the Potters' were compromised. Harry planned to break into the Ministry later to destroy any magical files they had on this potential blip on their map.

They also agreed to let Voldemort think he killed James at first. Harry slipped the idea into Peter's mind once he found the fat, balding man. It took every ounce of his restraint not to kill him on the spot as he instead planted a false memory of James dying inside Peter's mind. Eventually, Voldemort would find out that some version of James Potter still lived but not yet. Not so soon.

The hardest part came when Harry had to convince Lily to go along with Peter's story on how Sirius forced Peter to tell Voldemort where the Potters lived. Lily was not a natural liar and could not look Sirius in the eyes as she sent him to Azkaban. Harry looked on sadly, remembering Hermione's warning in his head. He could not change too many things or else the outcome would be totally unpredictable. Harry also did not destroy Voldemort's many Horcruxes. That would be Neville's job when the time came.

It was only a matter of time before Lily could not live with him. She could not live with the lies, the constant reminder of her husband, the never-ending feelings she endured when she faced Harry James Potter. So for everyone's sake, Harry left to live by himself. Harry, as James, still occasionally visited baby Harry, but it pained him to look into his eyes, knowing exactly what he had forced him to do even when he was a baby. Only time would partially heal the guilt. Time would never break their connection though as Harry was constantly reminded of the Blood Magic that lived within him. Older Harry used this connection to sometimes tap into the younger Harry's thoughts and magic. Little by little, the younger Harry would regain his magic but at the cost of older Harry's health.

James used that connection to hold Harry's own magic down. It was for his sake that Harry did not perform any strong bursts of magic. The less Voldemort knew about him, the better. James knew that as Harry would grow older, he would struggle to break from the

connection between the two. When the time came, Harry's magic would be restored but only when James decided that the time was right.

Only when the time was right.

Present...

Harry looked up at You-Know-Who with the sword in his hand. The evil psychopath seemed to be happy for some reason. Harry's eyes flicked over to Hermione. Bates was still holding her, but she seemed to be okay for the time being. His eyes flicked over to You-Know-Who and for the first time, Harry felt the wrath of his mind invasion.

Images assaulted Harry's mind as You-Know-Who combed through the lobes of Harry's brain. Flashes of his childhood appeared before him until You-Know-Who was quickly reaching Harry as infant. All of a sudden, You-Know-Who was violently kicked out of Harry's mind as he tried to access the part of Harry's mind when he was just a toddler.

"Interesting, Potter. You seem to have strong defenses around your mind there. Much stronger than your friend, Longbottom," You-Know-Who sneered Neville's name.

Harry did not speak, wary of You-Know-Who's ability to twist and turn his own words against him. He clutched the sword tightly as he looked around the Great Hall, looking for a way to escape and hoping the rest of the people would arrive soon enough. You-Know-Who seemed to notice Harry's wandering eyes and laughed.

"There's no escape, Potter. Now, the sword," You-Know-Who flicked his wand at the sword, performing a Summoning spell on it.

The sword yanked from Harry's hand, but Harry did not let go of it. He dug his heels in the floor as he held onto the sword for dear life. He did not know what You-Know-Who wanted with the sword, but he was not going to give it up without some sort of fight. You-Know-Who seemed a bit surprised that Harry was holding on to the sword and redoubled his efforts. Unfortunately for him, he was distracted by several loud booms outside the Great Hall.

Dumbledore had arrived.

Voldemort looked at him with deep loathing in his eyes. He dropped the Summoning spell on Harry as he immediately engaged Dumbledore. Several sparks flew in the air as more Aurors poured into the Hall. Chaos had ensued.

Harry ducked away from several of the spells, keeping a tight grip on his sword as he made his way to Hermione and the others. It occurred to Harry that this situation was not unlike the ones Sheppard had used to train them. As he ran along the way, Harry used the sword to slice away a large bag that one of the Death Eaters was carrying. He did not look back to see what exactly caused the howl of pain and instead carried the bag to his fellow classmates.

"Everyone, grab yours!" Harry yelled as the students huddled around him, grabbing at the bag.

"Ron, help me pull up some defenses!"

Harry and Ron started pulling tables and chairs about to form a blockade around them as several spells from both Death Eaters and Aurors whizzed throughout the Great Hall. It would not take much for a stray spell to find its target and Harry was not going to take any chances. He fired a Stunner that hit a Death Eater in the back, but Harry was not allowed any time to celebrate as a green curse flew just inches above his head. Ducking below a makeshift barrier, Harry looked back to see that most of the students had regained their wands and were firing into the crowd.

"Choose your shots! We don't want to take out any Aurors!" Harry yelled.

As he searched the crowd, however, it occurred to him that Hermione was not readily visible. He scrambled towards Neville, who was furiously casting hexes to and fro. Shaking the boy on the shoulder, Harry yelled in his ear so the other boy could hear him over the dense atmosphere of spells and screams.

"Neville, where's Hermione?" Harry yelled.

"I don't know," Neville yelled distractedly.

"Harry! I saw her with that Death Eater that took her," Seamus said as he knocked down a torch on top of a Death Eater.

Harry's blood ran cold as he remembered that the Death Eater that took her was Mr. Tattoo himself. Bates must have escaped through the back door of the Great Hall. Looking back, Harry could see that Malfoy had already beat him to the punch and was running towards the back. Not trusting Malfoy to leave any survivors, Harry made his way back over to Neville.

"Neville! I'm going after Hermione!"

"What - Harry - no - I'm going with you!" Neville started to pull away.

"No - no, they need you here. Keep them safe. I'll bring her back," Harry insisted.

Their eyes met, green versus brown. Harry could see the tumult of emotions in the other boy's eyes as he fought versus himself to decide whether or not he should give chase to Hermione. After a moment, Neville seemed to come to a conclusion and pushed Harry on the shoulder away from him.

"Bring her back, Harry."

Harry did not need any more words to force him away. Ducking a stray curse from the battle between You-Know-Who and Dumbledore, Harry ran for the back door. Bursting through the door, Harry saw Malfoy running up the back staircase to the Second floor. He quickly followed the boy, hoping he was not too late already. Leaping up the staircase, Harry saw that Bates was dragging Hermione by the arm on the far end of the hallway. Malfoy was halfway down the hallway as he gave chase to his mother's killer. Harry started after them, hoping to make ground.

"Lavender, stay down and watch your fire. That one almost hit Dumbledore!" Ron ordered as he surveyed the battle ground.

The situation was a nightmare. The students were mostly tucked into one corner of the Great Hall with their backs against the wall and a row of tables and blockades formed in front of them. Dumbledore and Voldemort were facing off in the middle of the



Great Hall. They were performing spells and magic that did not require any words and were not certainly not on the level of the Fifth years. Ron swore that Voldemort managed to summon a dragon out of fire at one point as the two most powerful wizards of their time engaged in a battle of epic proportions.

All around them, Aurors and Death Eaters were exchanging fire in little skirmishes. Though there were certainly more Aurors than Death Eaters, the crowded Hall made it difficult for the Aurors to use their superior numerical advantage. Above all of the battles, more Aurors were flying on brooms as they tried pick their targets out without harming their own. Precision was the test in this Great Hall.

"Zabini, to your left!"

Blaise fired a curse to the Death Eater on his left and toppled the Death Eater to the ground. The mask rolled off of him and Ron swore as he saw the man's face. Blaise looked at the Death Eater with an amused look on his face.

"Hey, Crabbe. I think I just got your father," he joked.

"My father's here?" Crabbe said in confusion.

Ron shook his head. Only Slytherins would find that amusing. As he turned around to talk to Neville, he found that the his friend was gone. Looking up, Ron saw that Neville was joining the battle against Voldemort.

"Oh boy."

Harry finally caught up to Bates and Malfoy. The two were already exchanging fire, but only haphazardly. Bates still had Hermione in a choke hold as he warded of Malfoy's spells. He was smiling at him, the grotesque burning on his face only making the man uglier and filthier. Malfoy was using several powerful curses, but Bates simply waved them off.

"Stupefy! Reducto! Crucio!"

Malfoy was apoplectic as he raged on Bates, not caring if Hermione could be a casualty of his anger. Bates kept grinning as he dodged and shielded himself from Malfoy, still holding Hermione hostage all

the while. Hermione struggled to escape his grip, but his hold on her throat was hampering her ability to fight him off. Bates caught Harry over Malfoy's shoulder and laughed gleefully.

"All three of you in one fell swoop. It must be my lucky day," Bates shrieked in happiness, the psychotic man obviously enjoying the fight.

Harry could not see a way to hit Bates without harming Hermione. Bates was using her as a perfect shield, placing her in front of him and crouching so his body was even less vulnerable to being hit. The only advantage to Harry was that Bates was much larger than Hermione and Harry could still hit him with some mildly irritating spells around the frame of his body. Malfoy, on the other hand, kept throwing darker and darker curses at Bates.

"That's it, little boy. Get mean. Get evil. Avenge that whore you call your mother," Bates egged him on.

Harry anticipated that these words would definitely set Malfoy off. Time slowed down in Harry's mind as Malfoy started to raise his wand. Harry looked around frantically, knowing exactly what spell Malfoy was going to use. Apparently, Hermione anticipated this action as well and used all of her strength to loosen Bates' grip and jam her elbow straight into Bates' groin. The Death Eater doubled over from pain, but that movement incidentally saved him from the Killing curse that Malfoy had cast. The Avada Kedavra swooshed over both Bates and Hermione, narrowly missing them both. Had Hermione not broken free, the curse certainly would have hit her first.

As it were, Hermione broke free while Malfoy redoubled his efforts to take down Bates. Bates had regained his posture from the slight setback and now focused his curses directly on Malfoy. Harry fired random spells towards the Death Eater but was mostly concentrating on making sure Hermione was safely away from the flurry of spells. Hermione crawled over to him, breathing hard as she watched Malfoy and Bates duel.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked her.

"Stupid bastard wouldn't let me go," Hermione gasped as she ran her hands over her neck, "Yes, I cursed."

"No time for jokes," Harry grunted as he pulled Hermione to her feet and hauled her away from the line of fire.

"Harry, you have to help Malfoy."

"I know," Harry said grimly, "You think you can make it back?"

"Not without my wand."

Harry bit his lip as he tried to figure out a solution.

"Alright, take cover behind this desk. I'm going to help Malfoy and then we can get out of here," Harry ordered. Hermione nodded and scrambled behind cover as Harry jumped up to engage Bates.

Malfoy was on the losing end of the battle as Bates simply overpowered him through experience and sheer power. The man had to be half-giant or something as Malfoy's curses were simply bouncing him off of his skin. Harry started attacking him with a series of Cutting curses, hoping to get under Bates' skin.

Bates was caught off-guard by Harry's sudden participation as he winced from the pain that cut into his arms. Harry maneuvered himself so that he and Malfoy were setting up a cross fire and Bates would not be allowed to focus all of his attention on one of them. Malfoy seemed to catch on the strategy and wisely sidestepped away to widen the radius of the attacks. Bates was now on the defensive as he brought up different shields against Malfoy and focused his attack-based curses on Harry.

Harry had no trouble shielding himself from Bates curses but could not find a window of opportunity to attack him. One Stunner was not enough to take him down as Harry remembered from his last encounter with Mr. Tattoo. Something drastic would be needed. Bates was apparently thinking the same thing and sought for a way to relieve the waves of curses that were splashing against his shields. He spotted his opportunity as Hermione lifted her head to watch the battle.

"No!" Harry yelled as he watched a yellow curse fly to Hermione.

Harry need not worry though as Hermione knew that Bates would attempt to use her a distraction for Harry. She raised her head

above the table, anticipating that Bates would attempt to curse her. Armed with that knowledge, she simply ducked down as soon as she Bates' wand move her direction. Malfoy, undisturbed by the knowledge that Hermione could even possibly be hurt, used this split second distraction to hit Bates in the knees with a Reductor curse. The Death Eater's knee blew apart and he howled in pain as he buckled and fell.

Malfoy wiped the sweat off his forehead as he approached the downed wizard with his wand drawn, aiming to kill.

Ron watched as Neville joined the fray and started casting some spells against Voldemort. As soon as Neville came close to Dumbledore though, Dumbledore pushed him away and kept fighting Voldemort on his own. Voldemort, sensing Dumbledore's weakness, focused his attacks on the boy. Dumbledore kept defending Neville, unable to land a deathly blow on the Dark Lord. Ron was entranced by the battle and almost did not notice Mr. and Mrs. Potter land beside him.

"Ron! Where's Harry?" James shook him on the shoulder.

Ron snapped out of his stupor and pointed to the back door, "Harry and Malfoy went after Hermione. One of the Death Eaters have her!"

"James, come on!" Lily dragged James to his feet as the weakened man stumbled to the back door.

Ron watched them disappear before refocusing his eyes on the fight between Voldemort and Dumbledore and Neville. Neville kept trying to stand and fight against Voldemort but Dumbledore was having none of it. He continued to repel Neville at all costs, shielding him from Voldemort's curses. Dumbledore was so wrapped up in protecting Neville that he did not see Voldemort hit him with a large, transfigured boulder.

Ron knew that the diagnosis was not going to be good from the way Dumbledore's knee was bent. The aged wizard did not break stride, however, as he continued to cast spell after spell against Voldemort. But Voldemort took advantage of Dumbledore's weakened state to hit Neville with a vicious blasting curse, knocking the boy back into the wall. With Dumbledore and Neville effectively neutered,

Voldemort took his cue to leave. Ron watched as Voldemort seemed to slither away from the battle unnoticed.

"Shit. Where's he going?" Ron wondered to himself. With Dumbledore crippled on the ground, Neville unconscious against a wall, and the rest of the Aurors remaining occupied, Ron was the only one to see Voldemort escape.

Summoning all of his Gryffindor bravery, Ron leaped over the barrier and gave chase.

"Ron, where are you going?" Lavender yelled.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Ron said under his breath.

Malfoy stood over Bates, his hair sticking up wildly and his eyes manic as he took in the sight of his mother's murderer. Bates laughed at him, blood trickling from the side of his mouth and a bloody stump where his left leg should have been.

"Come on, Malfoy. Do it," Bates hissed.

Malfoy raised his wand to perform the deed. Harry contemplated stopping Malfoy but knew the boy would simply ignore him. As Malfoy was about to hit Bates with the Killing Curse, a voice stopped him.

"Draco!"

Harry could recognize the authoritarian voice of Lucius Malfoy any day. Malfoy turned around, distracted by his father. Harry was too slow to react when Bates pulled his wand and hit Malfoy with some unknown purple spell. Malfoy rocketed back off his feet and hit the adjacent wall, slumping over in unconsciousness.

"No!" Lucius yelled as he ran to his fallen son.

Harry was again caught off-guard as Bates used some spell to sweep him off his feet and sprawling on the ground. As Harry scrambled to his feet, he watched as Bates cast the dreaded green of the Killing curse in Draco's direction. The spell seemed to move in slow motion as it flew across the classroom to Draco. It would have reached him had Lucius Malfoy not stepped in front of it and saved

his son. The green spell hit Lucius directly in the chest. The older Malfoy fell backwards in the air, his eyes squinted tight in death, and landing on Draco's unconscious form. Their bodies ended up so that Lucius Malfoy was being held in Draco's limp arms.

"Appropriate," Bates grinned.

Harry snapped out of it and hit Bates with a Stunner. It only seemed to be a mild irritant for the giant tattooed man as he flung a number of hexes in Harry's direction. Harry was light on his feet as he dodged the curses and returned fire. Harry knew he could defeat the Death Eater if given enough time in his weakened state; he was too fast for Bates. Bates, however, played dirty. Harry saw the Death Eater's eye swivel to the desk where Hermione was hiding behind and fired a spell towards it.

"Protego Maxima!"

Harry jumped in front of the spell and brought up his shield, absorbing the blow of the spell. Bates laughed maniacally as he strengthened his spell against the shield, causing Harry to take a step back at the power of it. Harry held his shield strong, but Bates simply kept applying more and more pressure on Harry. If he did not find a way out, the shield would eventually break.

"STUPEFY!"

The spell came from outside of the classroom and struck Bates with a surprising amount of force. The spell hit Bates at his most unguarded spot and sent him flying across the room. Harry dropped his shield and looked thankfully at the door as his mother and his father rushed into the room.

"Harry! Are you okay?" Lily asked as she hugged her son again.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Malfoy though," Harry croaked.

James checked the two unmoving bodies and delivered the diagnosis, "Lucius is dead. Draco's alive but got hit by something pretty nasty."

"Hermione! Thank goodness you're okay too," Lily pulled the other girl in a hug as well.

"Thanks, Mrs. Potter. I wouldn't have gotten away if it wasn't for Harry," Hermione looked at Harry with admiration.

"Well, we're not done yet. You-Know-Who is still here," Harry picked up the sword and checked the hallways outside. It was empty.

Ron ran by one of the fighters and noticed that it was the real Moody. He doubled back and caught Moody's attention.

"Moody! Voldemort's not in there anymore! He's going somewhere, but I don't know where!" Ron yelled at him.

"Why would that bastard leave Dumbledore and Longbottom?"

"That's what I was wondering. He went this way," Ron pointed down a corridor.

"You might be onto something, lad. Owen! Michaels! With me! Have to make sure Voldemort isn't terrorizing the rest of the castle," Moody barked out.

The three soldiers and Ron ran down the hallway after Lord Voldemort.

"Alright, we need to get going. They're still all in the Great Hall, I think," Lily said as she checked the hallways.

"Okay, Harry and Hermione you go this way and -"

James was speaking to them but fell to the ground in pain, clutching his head.

"Dad, what's wrong?" Harry rushed to him and knelt on the ground to cradle his Dad's head.

"It's nothing, just a pain," James muttered.

"James," Lily looked worried as she knelt down on his other side. James and Lily exchanged a glance and communicated something wordlessly. Hermione watched in fascination and confusion at the whole scenario.

"Harry, there's something we have to tell you," James started, still bent over on the ground.

"I'm sure it can wait, Dad. You two really don't have to get back together for me. There's time to talk to later," Harry tried to joke. Joking always put his father in a better mood.

"No," James said fiercely, "I have to -"

James stopped and groaned again, clutching his head more fiercely.

"What's going on?" Harry said as he tried to help his father to his feet.

James suddenly stood, his back straightening and his head held up high. With a power Harry did not know James could summon, much less in his weakened state, he pushed his family and Hermione back and conjured a magical barrier between them.

"Dad!"

"James!"

Harry and Lily cried out as they pounded on the magical barrier. James looked at both of them sadly as he turned to them. He smiled, the kind of smile that was associated with a certain knowing of the upcoming events. But James suddenly moaned and bent over, his hands clutching his head.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off..."

James ordered them to leave as he turned around in time to see Voldemort turning the corner, looking as angry as any of them had ever seen them. Lily did not need a second warning and grabbed Harry and Hermione by their hands and tore off in the other direction.

"Wait - Mum! What are you doing! Dad!" Harry tried to pry her hands off of his but she was not letting go as she dragged them around the corner.

"Harry has it under control," Lily muttered under her breath.



"Mum! What are you talking about? I'm right here! We can't just leave Dad there!"

"He will be right behind us. That magical barrier can let him through and hold off Voldemort," Lily bit her lip as they careened around the corridors.

Harry looked back worriedly, hoping James would be right behind them.

"James Potter; and I thought I was the only one who could come back from the dead," Voldemort said as he came closer and closer.

"Peter's never been one to get the facts right," James said quietly as he looked straight into Voldemort's eyes. He did not flinch when Voldemort tried to invade his mind, repelling the Dark Lord easily.

"Powerful. I knew someone must have been teaching the Potter boy," Voldemort almost acknowledged Harry's strength.

"Raising the tower will not stop them from killing you. Not now. Not anymore," James almost smiled at him.

Voldemort looked shocked by the possibility that Potter might know about the tower.

"I will raise the Dark Tower of the Founders and capture it's power to enslave all of this land. No wizard, no Muggle, no half-breed will be able to stop me. Certainly not you! Avada Kedavra!"

The green spell hit James in the chest but instead of falling over like most victims usually did, James erupted into flames. His body was set ablaze, a reaction Voldemort had never seen before. As the body hit the ground, still burning all the while, a small ball of magic shot off down the hallway. Voldemort could hear a distant screaming from Potter's body but knew it could not be from the already dead man.

"Stupid boy."

Harry, Hermione, and Lily were still running down the corridor when Harry suddenly fell over, a pain erupting inside his chest. None of

them saw the tether of magic streak down the hallway and hit Harry in the back.

"Arggggh!"

Harry yelled as an overwhelming pain brought him to his knees. Hermione frantically took Harry's wand and started to perform a diagnosis on him. Lily looked back worriedly as she tried to pull Harry to his feet. Harry stood but stumbled, the pain holding him down.

"My chest. It hurts," Harry said through gritted teeth.

"Harry, your magic. It's too much," Hermione's eyes widened as she watched Harry start to emanate a strong, blue aura around himself.

The sudden pause in their escape was enough for Voldemort to catch up to them. He flew around the corner, literally hovering above the ground as he found the group of three. He menacingly drew his wand and pointed it at them.

"The sword, Potter!"

Harry grit his teeth and kept the sword by his side, refusing to let it go even through the pain. Lily shielded Harry and Hermione from the Dark Lord, her arms splayed over them in a form of defense. Hermione was catatonic as she came face to face with Voldemort, unable to move from her position behind Lily.

"Stand aside you silly girl...stand aside now."

"Not Harry, please no. Don't kill, Harry!"

Lily begged with tears in her eyes. Harry tried to stand up from behind her but the overwhelming pain in his chest was rendering him almost comatose. He could feel himself slipping in and out of consciousness as more bursts of magic exploded inside his chest.

"Not Harry! Please...have mercy...have mercy..."

Voldemort laughed; a cold, high laugh that pierced their ears as he raised his wand. Harry did not need to hear the dreaded words or see the bright flash of light to know which curse Voldemort used.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The curse struck Lily, killing her on the spot. She tumbled backwards, collapsing on Harry and Hermione with her hands outstretched. Her last pleads of mercy fell upon deaf ears as the psychotic terrorist succeeded in killing Harry Potter's mother. Harry watched as his mother fell into his arms, her eyes still open as the tears began to dry on her face. A numbing pain washed over Harry, cancelling out the torturous pain inside his chest. Time stopped for him as he looked at his mother's beautiful face, still frozen as if she were alive.

No.

"The sword, Potter."

No.

"Accio Sword."

No.

"Thank you for the sword. Now, let's complete the collection."

"NOOO!"

It felt as if dam broke in Harry's chest. He could feel the grief compound with his magic as it started rushing through him, the powerful current of magic threatening to erupt within him. Fueled with anger and grief, the strong river of magic broke the dam inside Harry's chest and unleashed a powerful force into the world.

Glass shards and bricks broke free and swirled around Harry. Harry was still screaming in the air, his lungs burning as he yelled in vain. A tornado of debris flew around them and Voldemort looked genuinely afraid as he held the sword and looked at the boy. Shards of glass started flying at Voldemort and the Dark Lord had to use his most potent defenses to deflect the curses. Harry continued to summon everything in sight: glass, rocks, desks, torches. He hurled all of them to Voldemort while still howling in pain. Voldemort could not defend himself from all of the materials but eventually waved his wand and turned them all into sand.

"Voldemort."

Harry's eyes were glowing green as he raised his wand and simply pointed it at Voldemort. A deadly red light erupted from the wand and raced towards Voldemort. Voldemort raised his own and met the red beam with his own green beam. Pulling his wand to and fro, Voldemort was shocked at the strength of the magic behind Harry Potter. He finally pulled his wand so the connection would snap, but Harry Potter was not done.

Screaming as loud as he could again, Harry shattered everything in sight. The walls started to shake as the doors broke off their hinges and flew at Voldemort. Voldemort turned on the spot and created a magical barrier that repelled the flying objects. Bits of glass were tearing at Voldemort's robes as Harry's magic threatened to overtake him.

"My Lord!" a voice yelled from behind him.

Running through the force fields of magic was Bellatrix Lestrange, a boot clutched in her hand. Voldemort took one more look back at the powerful boy before grasping onto the boot and disappearing from sight. The Portkey took the pair away as Voldemort finally escaped from Harry.

Harry stopped screaming when Voldemort disappeared. Several bits and pieces of debris were still hanging in mid-air; an after effect of his magical destruction. He turned to Hermione and saw she was curled into a ball, her hands over her ears and her eyes shut tight. There were rocks and glass all around her but she seemed to be protected by an invisible dome. Harry felt the power drain out of him and watched as the glass and debris fell all around them. He looked down at his mother's dead body, the pain and grief suddenly shooting sharply in his heart.

His mind ceased to function then, not accepting the deaths quite yet. As Harry fell to the ground, he could see the blurry outlines of Ron Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody racing to the scene just before he fell into a deep unconsciousness.

"How is he?"

"Still asleep."

Hermione was sitting at Harry's bedside, working on some of her Transfiguration homework. In all honesty, Transfiguration was the furthest thing from her mind. It was almost a week after the Battle of Hogwarts and Harry still had not woken from his deep slumber. Madame Pomfrey called it "severe magical exhaustion." The way she explained it to the rest of the interested party, it was akin to the energy created when a new, magical baby was born. No one was able to explain the phenomena, not even Dumbledore.

"I brought you some food. Ron is going to be up in a couple of minutes," Neville sat down next to her as he looked at Harry's sleeping form.

"Thanks," she accepted the food gratefully and started digging in.

"Did Pomfrey say if there was any progress?"

"She said he'll wake up when he's ready to wake up," Hermione said in between mouthfuls of food.

As Hermione finished her food, Neville started hesitantly, "Hermione - we - I mean me and Ron -"

"Ron and I."

"Ron and I were talking," Neville sighed, "We'll take turns watching over Harry if you want. You haven't been out of here in a whole week."

Hermione's face turned blank, an expression Neville was used to nowadays, "I want to be here when he wakes up."

"We'll come get you," Neville insisted, "I promise the second he wakes up, we'll run off to get you. We just want to see you take a break for a moment."

"I'm completely fine, Neville. All of my work can get done here and I'm already ahead of schedule. You and Ron should get ahead while the Professors are giving us a little break."

"Hermione, the Professors aren't grading anything for a little while! We just got attacked by Voldemort -"

"You don't think I know that?"

Hermione's tone was icy, her face stormy as she interrupted Neville. Neville sighed and rubbed his jaw in frustration. Hermione kept her voice calm even though her eyes said everything otherwise.

"I'm completely fine here, Neville. You and Ron need not worry about me so much. I'm not the one that's in a semi-coma."

"We all care about Harry. We just want you to have some fresh air is all."

"Neville, just drop it. I'm staying."

"Dammit -"

"Don't you dare," Hermione's voice cracked, "Harry has no one. No one. His parents are dead. His godfather hates him because of his father and the only other living relatives he has hate magic so much that they wouldn't dare come close to Harry. So I'm staying and that's final."

Hermione had not moved during her tirade. Her hands were still placed firmly on her lap, but her posture was defensive, ready to lash out against anyone that dare try to breach her protective circle. Neville looked at her evenly, different emotions flickering through his face. After a moment, he stood up with his face guarded.

"The offer still stands. Come and get us if Harry wakes. Dumbledore wants to meet me, but Ron and I will come back here afterwards if you want."

Hermione did not respond and looked down at her parchment to refocus on her Transfiguration homework. Neville gave her an indiscernible look as he left the Hospital Wing. After he left, Hermione exhaled deeply, her body sagging as if a pressure was lifted off her shoulders. Neville could not understand the situation. Though he had faced Voldemort multiple times, nothing compared to

watching Lily's death. To witness everything first hand only served to burn the visuals into Hermione's mind.

Hermione looked at Harry's face. He looked almost peaceful if it were not for the fact that he had fallen into some sort of a magical coma. Pomfrey had no exact time table as to when he would awake but assured everyone that he would not stay comatose forever. It was just a matter of his body recouping the magical energy he expelled during his fight with Voldemort. Hermione shuddered as she remembered the sheer, raw force that poured off of Harry as he let loose. She had never felt anything like it.

"Granger," Moody growled as he hobbled into the ward.

"Mr. Moody. Hello, sir," Hermione closed her textbook and stood up to properly greet the General, "Forgive me if I'm being rude, but what are you doing here, sir?"

"Please, Granger, none of the pleasantries. We spent enough time over the summer together to bypass this whole 'sir' business."

"I apologize -"

"Don't apologize either! I hate apologies."

Hermione simply shut her trap. Moody had a way of shutting people up; even the loquacious Hermione Granger. Moody murmured something as he ran his wand over Harry's body. The wand glowed brightly for a moment as it passed over him. Once Moody was apparently finished conducting his presumed test, Hermione hesitantly asked him what exactly was that spell.

"Mr. Moody, what was that?"

"Just a testing charm, missy, nothing to worry about it. We do it to all the new recruits just to make sure they don't got any Dark Magic on 'em," Moody said as he wrinkled his nose.

"New recruits?" Hermione probed.

"No need to worry. We're not taking him away. Just a matter of simple curiosity on my part. After all, I did witness the latter end of the display he put up in front of Voldemort," Moody explained.

"Do you know exactly what that was? I mean - what Harry did? I've never seen any magic like that," Hermione had to ask, her curiosity always getting the better of her.

"Aye - you're right about never seeing anything like that. Once upon a time - back in Voldemort's old days - he was able to conjure up fierce bouts of magic like that. It may surprise you to know that he's a bit weaker now."

"Weaker? I would have thought Voldemort would have gone stronger through all the knowledge he gained. Sort of like Dumbledore."

"In theory, you are correct, Granger. But even Wizards have a decaying lifespan. They say we reach our peak age in our eighties. Voldemort's nearing just about that age but his setbacks have cost him."

"Setbacks? You mean what Neville did to him when he was a baby?" Hermione curiously asked.

"That's one of 'em."

"One?"

Moody fixed both of his eyes on her, a slightly unnerving picture since his magical eye never seemed to focus on one area. In a voice much quieter than he was speaking at previously, Moody started to speak.

"Some magic is unspeakable, even to an old conk like me. Suffice to say that Voldemort pushed boundaries - inhumane boundaries. But everything comes at a price - take that lesson to the grave, missy."

Moody spoke no more but instead continued to look at Harry curiously. Hermione was pondering over his words in the meanwhile. What exactly did Moody mean? She knew that Voldemort was a prodigy at his age, but what did Moody mean by 'pushing boundaries.' Had Voldemort found a way to make himself stronger until Neville somehow weakened him on that fateful night?



Hermione was tempted to voice her thoughts aloud to Moody but did not know whether the ex-Auror and current General could possibly answer the question. He did not seem receptive to a response when he told her of Voldemort's supposed boundaries. His magical eye was finally moving in wide circles again as he turned to address her.

"Would ya consider yourself a good friend of Potter?"

Hermione paused, considering the question, "Yes."

At Hermione's response, Moody drew a leaf of parchments from the inside coat of his jacket. Licking one of his fingers to help separate the leaflets, he procured one of them and handed it to Hermione. Hermione took it curiously and started reading from the very top. It took her but a fraction of a second to realize that she was reading the Will of Lily Potter.

"James forgot to draw one up, I suppose. Either that or they just agreed to Lily's will. The Goblins were having a mess trying to sort out the Potter foundation. Seemed as if someone had been tampering with the vaults all the while. Anyways, I've been ordered to distribute these. I know the Weasley girl is a good friend of his but she's off on top secret orders," Moody grabbed another set of papers and laid it down next to Hermione.

"Top secret orders?" Hermione asked distractedly, reading through the Will.

"Aye. She fought tooth and nail to come back to Hogwarts and lead the charge, but she's too valuable up front to have a leave of absence."

"She's doing well then?"

"Very well."

"Glad to hear it."

Hermione did care for Ginny; she really did. Unfortunately, she was mightily distracted by Lily Potter's will. She obviously left most of the fortunes to Harry. There were slight deductions for Sirius and Remus as well. Near the bottom was a scrawl that resembled James' signature, but it looked incredibly dated. It was as if James

had signed off on the Will first and then Lily filled in the blanks. For some reason, the discrepancy was bothering her. Before she could further investigate, she realized that Moody was calling for her.

"Granger. Are you paying attention?"

"No - oh - I'm sorry, Mr. Moody!"

"Moody. No more misters."

"Moody."

"Yes. As I was saying, show that to Potter when he wakes up. His blood relatives are Muggles which would have left Black to handle his proceedings - but not even death can heal everything," Moody looked uncomfortable as he shifted the topic to Harry's godfather.

"You mean to tell me that Sirius isn't going to assume the responsibility of Harry's guardian?" Hermione asked, a bit shocked.

"Technically speaking, Sirius is Potter's guardian. James and Lily never removed him as his godfather. I just assumed it would be better for you to deliver the news when Potter wakes up rather than for Sirius to tell him. Longbottom tells me that Potter didn't even know about Sirius until recently."

"Sirius and James didn't get along very well..." Hermione trailed off as she remembered some of the more awkward confrontations the pair had over the summer at Grimmauld's.

"Exactly the reason I chose you, Granger. I trust you know how to explain the Will to Potter when he wakes up. They say you're a bit smart," Moody looked like he winked at Hermione, but the girl could not tell if it was a wink or just a tick of his eye.

"I'll do it."

"Excellent. One more thing," Moody reached into his jacket, feeling around his multitude of pockets for some object. Finally finding said object, Moody pulled it out of his jacket and held it out for Hermione to see.

At the end of a silver chain hung a small and smooth pebble. The pebble was not formed in any particular shaping or glossing. For all intensive purposes, it looked to just be a regular pebble. Even Moody was eyeing it strangely as he handed it to Hermione.

"There were specific instructions to deliver this to Potter once the Will is executed. It's from Lily and James and they wished for Potter to wear it when he could. You have any explanations for that?" Moody was also curious as to the significance of the pebble.

"Not particularly," Hermione rolled the pebble in her hands, trying to find anything to ratify it's worth.

Moody humped as he gathered the rest of his belongings. Moody saluted her casually as he left the ward, the heavy thud of his wooden stump echoing for quite a while until he was out of earshot. Hermione continued to roll the pebble over in her fingers. She would have to ask Harry when he awoke what the significance of the pebble was.

Unclasping the silver chain, she leaned over Harry and scooted the chain under his neck. Reversing the chain so that she could clasp it easily within view, she completed the chain and turned it once again so the pebble was lying directly on his chest. At this proximity, Hermione could feel the soft tickle of his breath against her cheek. She looked down at him and examined him from close distance. The lack of movement behind his eyelids indicated that his eyeballs were completely still, a trait associated with deep comas.

She leaned down and kissed each of his eyelids. Pulling back, she patted his hand gently and spoke, "Stay for as long as you want, Harry. I'll be hear when you get back."

Harry did not wake up the next day. Or the day after. On the third day, Hermione was sitting in her usual spot to Harry's right, translating some Ancient Runes. Even for Hermione, the distraction of homework was not enough to drive the over looming presence of the War out of her mind. Fudge had taken the Battle of Hogwarts as an opportunity to drum up the press and push for more drafts. Terry Boot and two other Seventh Years were called up the day before.

Strangely enough, Voldemort's forces did not intensify after the Battle. Presumably the Battle had taken a strong toll on Voldemort's

forces. Around twenty Death Eaters were either captured or declared dead on site in the aftermath of the Battle. Unfortunately for Hermione, Bates was not among them. The despicable man had somehow escaped despite his missing leg.

Neville and Ron dropped by later in the afternoon with a couple of snacks for Hermione. Either Ron did not notice or did not acknowledge the coolness between Hermione and Neville as he prattled on about the injustices of Fudge.

"It's a good thing you're you, Neville. You'll never get snatched up by Fudge's death claws," Ron said through a bite of biscuits.

"Well, he doesn't particularly fancy me so it's not out of the realm of possibility."

"Puh-lease. The press would have a field day if you were chosen, you are the Chosen One after all."

Neville tensed as Ron let slip the little title. Hermione caught the tiny movement and swiveled her head over to Neville. Neville shifted uncomfortably and did not meet her eye. Hermione could tell he was hiding something from her and the easiest way to get Neville's secrets was always through Ron.

"Why do you say the Chosen One?" Hermione asked casually, not lifting her eyes so that Ron would not catch the drift.

Before Neville could stop him, Ron spoke, "Well, the prophecy of course. Neville did tell you didn't he?"

Hermione gripped her book tighter. Deep inside her, she supposed that Neville's omission was deserved to some degree. She was slightly neglecting on her duties as a friend to both Neville and Ron after a trying time. But who was she to play caretaker of them forever? At this point in time, Hermione judged Harry's needs to be greater than Neville and Ron's. Still, it did not stop the hurt of betrayal from creeping under her skin.

"What do you think of all of it? It's pretty heavy stuff," Ron commented.

"Wouldn't know. I don't know the prophecy."

"What do you mean you don't know it? Didn't Neville - oh," Ron realized his error at this point as Neville continually glared at him.

"Don't look at me like that!" Ron put his hands in front of him as a sign of innocence, "You told me you were going to tell her!"

"Well, I obviously didn't," Neville hissed back.

"Oh, I don't mind. Leave me out of the loop. See if I care," Hermione said bitterly.

"Don't play the wounded person in this Hermione. You don't even know the prophecy," Neville replied in an annoyed tone.

"I conveniently don't know because someone conveniently didn't tell me!" Hermione's voice was starting to rise, a long week of frustration threatening to burst from within her.

"Now guys, let's calm down a bit -"

"Shut up, Ron!"

Neville and Hermione were standing toe to toe as they started to really get into the argument.

"What did you expect, Hermione? You're cooped up here every single day. Harry isn't going to get any better if you're sitting there with him."

"And what if I want to be here? What if I want to stay with him until he wakes up? Did that ever occur to you, Chosen One?" she mocked his nickname.

"You want to know why I am the Chosen One?"

"Oh, please. Do tell."

"Because the prophecy says either I have to kill him or he has to kill me," Neville hissed the right part right at her, enunciating every word so she could hear it clearly.

Hermione took a step back, clearly not expecting this revelation. Different emotions battled within her. Her reluctance to lose the argument ebbed away and was replaced by shock. Following the shock was a deep sorrow for Neville. As the sorrow settled, she finally reached the analytical and sympathetically phase of her mind.

"Neville - I didn't know - I'm sorry," Hermione choked out, "Is that what Dumbledore had to tell you the other day?"

"Yes," Neville muttered, losing his steam.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she pleaded.

"You had enough on your plate without needing to worry about that as well," Neville confessed.

"Neville," she placed a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to meet her gaze, "Just because I'm here doesn't mean I've left you guys. It'll always be the three of us."

Neville nodded, his eyes lowering to his feet at her admission. Even he seemed to feel a bit guilty for pressuring her to leave. Ron looked on, his mouth agape as he was still reeling at the fact that Neville lied to him.

"I leave for one second and all hell breaks loose around here."

The voice came from near the entrance of the room. Three heads snapped around to find Ginny Weasley clad in the standard green and beige of the Minister's Army. She had her hands on her hips in a combative stance but the slight smile on her face gave her away.

"Ginny!"

They all yelled and rushed towards the girl, hugging her in one big mob. There was much laughter for a moment as the tense moment was disrupted by the arrival of their close friend. She happily hugged them back, laughing as she was reunited with her friends.

"I feel like we're at a reunion," Ginny nabbed away the fake tears, "But he always has to ruin the party."

Ginny's smile fell as she approached Harry's beside and looked down at her friend. She poked his shoulder and shook her head sadly.

"Damn. I wish he was faking it."

"He's not," Hermione softly replied as she came up from behind the girl and wrapped her arms around her.

"He'll be alright though, right?" there was only a slight waver in her voice as she held Hermione's encircled arms.

"What are you doing here, Gin? Mad-Eye said that you were on top secret stuff," Ron asked his sister.

"I am on top secret stuff; but my unit was dropping by the area and I found a way to spare some time and visit you dramatic lot," she explained.

"Moody says you've flown up the ranks," Hermione remembered from her conversation with the ex-Auror.

"That's what happens when you take down a dragon by yourself."

"You took down a dragon by yourself?" Ron and Neville simultaneously asked in awe.

"It was an accident mostly," Ginny visibly cringed, "We had a dragon attack near our sector. We don't really expect dragons most of the time; it's hard to hide them from the Muggles. But anyways, the dragon shows up and we're all caught out of sorts. They never let me do the fighting so it's the first time I've actually been in action. I aimed my Blasting curse at one of it's legs, not that it would actually do anything to it. I ended up tripping over my own feet and my Blasting curse went way up in the air. It ended up hitting a spike column that fell and killed the Dragon. I played it off well enough."

The Trio laughed at Ginny's story with Ron clapping her on the back.

"Oi, it's not that funny! I could have died!" Ginny insisted.

"We've all had a bit of that around here," Ron joked darkly.

"Yes we have."

Harry was awake.

There was an awkward pause in the conversation as Ron turned red enough to challenge a tomato for its position on the food pyramid. Hermione broke the awkwardness by rushing to Harry's bedside and grasping his hand tightly.

"Madame Pomfrey! Harry's awake! You're awake - you're back!"

"I am," Harry's voice was hoarse from misuse.

As Madame Pomfrey rushed over and started conducting her tests, Hermione kept speaking to him, rapidly firing on numerous points.

"I'm so glad you're back, Harry. We're all glad you're back; look, even Ginny's stopped by for a visit. You've been asleep for over a week, but Madame Pomfrey said you'd be alright so I didn't need to worry. How are you? How are you feeling? Do you want some food?"

"Hermione. My parents."

Hermione's voice failed her, her mouth hanging soundlessly. She did not expect Harry to breach the topic so soon, so quickly after he had just woken up. She prepared an entire speech to console Harry; she even made highlight points to emphasize certain areas such as keeping your friends close and not pushing people away. Unfortunately, even her genius mind was drawing a blank; the shock of his sudden interrogation was too much for her.

Apparently, words had failed everyone else as well. Only Madame Pomfrey kept working through the silence. She was old enough to have seen loved ones die; it came with her profession. Harry sighed as he realized the implications of the silence. His green eyes were dull and his face expressionless as he lay still for Pomfrey's examinations.

"For a moment, I thought it was all a dream."

His words broke Hermione's heart. A long week of frustration and endless days waiting for Harry to wake caught up with her as tears



seeped earnestly out of her eyes. She turned and brushed them away, wishing that she did not have to compound Harry's sadness with her own weakness. After all, she did not lose anyone in this Battle. Though she had gotten to know James and Lily better, they were not her parents. Hermione still had her parents.

"No need to cry. I'm fine."

Harry looked fine to the naked eye. There were no tears nor were there any outbursts of sadness or anger. He looked complacent as Pomfrey conducted more tests on him. His eyes did not reveal anything but maybe that was the problem. If one likened a person's eyes as the windows to their souls, then Harry's shutters were completely closed. Not an ounce of emotion flashed across his face. Hermione placed her hand over his but felt no reaction. Despite his emotional placidness, Hermione kept a tight grip on his hand nonetheless.

"You seem to be okay, Mr. Potter," Madame Pomfrey spoke up as everyone was at a lost for words, "You're a little weak and need bed rest while I give you some Strengthening Potions, but you'll be able to leave tomorrow."

"Thank you, Madame Pomfrey."

As the mediwizard took her leave, the quartet took their turns sharing troubled looks involving the strangely calm Harry Potter. It was not as if they expected him to fall into some sort of egregious crying mutiny, but the lack of emotion was unsettling to say the least. Hermione kept a firm grip on Harry's hand as if letting go would cause him to drift off into nothingness. Though he did not respond, Harry did not pull away his hand either.

"Is everyone else okay?"

It would be like Harry to think of everyone else despite the awful trauma he had to endure. Hermione thought that perhaps Harry was simply deflecting his worries by focusing on other people but answered the question regardless. It was important to keep an open dialogue lest Harry completely shutdown ala Malfoy.

"Everyone got out okay enough. Nott's going to have some nasty scarring on his back but he'll be alright. A couple of other people

took some nasty bumps during the chaos but nothing severe. The Aurors seemed to have handled everything okay. The only thing that's worrying is that Malfoy's gone."

"Malfoy's gone?" Harry droned, a slight touch of curiosity inflected in his voice.

"No one could find him after the Battle. Same with Bates," Hermione hesitantly added the last part.

"I see."

The quartet exchanged glances again at Harry's casual dismissal of the situation. Harry was staring straight at the ceiling, his hand still in Hermione's as his face remained a picturesque vision of stoniness. An artist could not have asked for a better still frame.

"Hullo, Ginny. Nice to see you here. How are you?" Harry mechanically stated each sentence.

"I'm here you big prat," Ginny touched him lightly on the shoulder, "I only wish I could have been here to help your scrawny ass."

"You would have been a great help."

Harry's voice did not intend to inflict great guilt upon Ginny, but the girl felt it nonetheless. It was not as if she were standing by on the sidelines as she also was fighting a war on her front, but the helplessness of knowing that her friends were caged in Hogwarts stung at her every day the siege took place. She begged the lead in her unit to let her have a couple hours to visit her friends. Due to extenuating circumstances, she was allowed such a peace at this time.

"I heard you did just great yourself, Harry," Ginny softly complimented him.

"I suppose."

"We - um - there's a lot of stuff for you here, Harry. Mostly chocolates; everyone seems to think that makes everything better," Ron started sorting through the various gifts Harry's housemates

had sent or dropped off at the Hospital Wing in an attempt to break the rather sullen mood of the conversation.

"Oh, why thank you. I'm not hungry right now though."

Ron dropped some Chocolate Frogs back into the basket as Harry voiced his dismissal. Neville struggled to find the words to console Harry. Though they shared a common bond in that they were both orphans, Neville feared that anything he might say would unbalance Harry. Thus, Neville stayed quiet and settled for giving Harry sympathetic looks.

"Madame Pomfrey? Can we take Harry outside for a bit? Just to get some fresh air?" Ginny had an idea to at least break up the overbearing mood.

"He'll have to go in a wheelchair. But yes, you can bring him out as long as he's back in an hour."

"Is that okay with you, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"I'm sure that would be lovely."

They helped pile Harry onto the conjured wheelchair as his legs were still weak from the exhausting of his magical core. After some slight fussing by Hermione, they were off to navigate the corridors of Hogwarts. The wheelchair seemed to have been charmed to levitate over steps or stairs which allowed the group to wander anywhere they wanted. Along the way, they met many of the other students of Hogwarts. Though Hermione, Neville, and Ron were already used to the congratulations, Harry was new to the process as several students congratulated him for his part in the Battle and Siege of Hogwarts.

"Potter. I'm sorry for what happened to your parents. I just wanted to let you know that should you ever need us, the Slytherin House will not let you down. Not after what we witnessed the Dark Lord - Voldemort do," Nott said as they ran into him near the boundaries of the Great Hall.

Harry nodded his thanks, his voice still a bit rusty. They continued outside until they settled underneath a comfortable tree, watching the sunset across the lake. The red and gold mixed in with the water

to cast a comfortable light among them. Harry was situated underneath the tree in his wheelchair with Hermione sitting in front of him by his feet. Ginny was behind them leaning against the tree while Neville and Ron sat off to the side. They exchanged idle chit chat, mostly involving the several Death Eaters that were captured at the Battle of Hogwarts.

"I reckon it'll make your job easier, Ginny," Neville addressed the girl.

"Hopefully, it will. I told Harry that the Death Eaters don't do much of the fighting underground. They send werewolves and other creatures to do their bidding. We have noticed a decrease in some sectors since the Battle but they're still giving us a hard time. Even though they lost the Battle here, they still seem invigorated," Ginny explained.

"It's because of that bloody sword," Ron complained, "I don't know why the bugger wanted it so much."

Hermione stayed silent, careful not to broach any topics that would get too close to the death of Harry's parents. The time for confrontation would eventually ease its way into Harry's path to recovery. She read up on several books on the several steps of depression and grief and knew that no matter what, she needed to maintain an open dialogue with Harry and not be completely shut off in any way. Harry's lack of close companions besides Ginny and family besides the wretched Muggles and Sirius left Hermione with the task of completing his recovery.

"Either way. Big blow to Voldemort," Ginny tossed an errant leaf into the air.

"So no word on Bates?" Harry suddenly interjected.

"No," Neville responded, "The bastard got away."

"I'd kill him if I got the chance. Especially for taking you, Hermione," Ron defended her honor.

"That's nice of you, Ron, but I hope you wouldn't be foolish enough to try to take him on by yourself," Hermione admonished him.

"He isn't that big. Toss our wands away and I bet I could take him," Ron kissed both of his biceps.

"I'm pretty sure you couldn't take me on, much less Bates," Ginny sarcastically responded.

Harry snorted which caused Neville to chuckle which caused Ron to chuckle which eventually led into a widespread laughter amongst the group. Even Hermione joined in on the fun as the addictive laughter spread like wildfire. Leaning back on Harry's leg, Hermione looked up and hoped to see some semblance of happiness on Harry's face. But even though Harry was laughing, his eyes were still blank. This type of callousness worried Hermione.

After a few more minutes, Ginny had to bid farewell to her friends. She took time to give Harry a hug and inform all of them that they could always write her and she would eventually find the time to write back to them. After Hermione handed Ginny the other half of the two-way mirror, the group watched her disappear the winding pathway to the gates of Hogwarts. Sensing it was time to return to Madame Pomfrey, the Trio plus Harry began the path back to Hogwarts.

As they passed the Second floor of Hogwarts, Harry suddenly laid a hand on Hermione's forearm. She was pushing the wheelchair along when she felt his pressure and looked at him questioningly. He did not look back but kept his eyes fixed on a certain spot in the hallway. It occurred to Hermione that they accidentally returned to the site of Lily's death. Hermione tensed as she realized that Harry recognized this particular passageway. Neville and Ron noticed that the other pair stopped and looked at them quizzically.

"Go on ahead, we'll meet you in the Hospital Wing in a second," Hermione assured them.

Ron and Neville looked at each other and shrugged but continued on their way. As they disappeared around the bend, Hermione walked so she was in front of Harry and bent over slightly so she could meet his eyes.

"Harry, I know this must be incredibly hard for you. I'm not going to patronize you and tell you that I understand what you're feeling or that I even empathize with you. No amount of words could possibly

describe what you must feel. I just want you to know that no matter what happens. No matter what - I won't leave your side. I owe you a debt, Harry, for saving my life, but I'm not staying with you because of that debt. I'm staying with you because I want to and because I want to help you in any way possible."

Hermione finally delivered the speech she wanted to give him since he awoke. It was not perfect or exactly as how she wrote it, but she hoped it was enough to portray the lengths to which she would go for him. Harry met her eyes for the first time without looking as if he were one of those advanced Muggle robots. It was not completely devoid of emotions either as Hermione detected a flicker of sadness in his expression. Reaching up to cup her cheek softly, he simply whispered to her.

"Thank you."

Hermione leaned into his touch and smiled at him, the tears once again threatening to overflow her. Harry casually brushed a tear off of her cheek as Hermione recognized the same complacency residing in his expression once again. As turned off as she was by Harry's reticence to fall into this particular mask, she understood the need to bottle his emotions. She would be there when he needed to keep it to himself and she would also be there when he needed to let loose his grief.

"Can you just give me some time alone?" Harry croaked.

Hermione nodded, "I'll be right around the corner when you need me."

Hermione walked away and left him to muse on his own thought. She would come back for him in a couple of minutes, fearful that the locale would rear painful memories. As soon as she was gone,

Harry slowly turned his wheelchair so that he entered the room where he and Malfoy squared off with Bates. His eyes glossed over the room as a flash of memories echoed in his skull. Still keeping his calm visage, Harry stretched out his hand so that his open palm was pointing towards a chair. The chair suddenly levitated into the air, a clear meter off the ground. Harry watched it curiously, his head cocked as he examined the floating object.

Harry suddenly closed his palm, turning his hand into a fist. At that same moment, the chair exploded, the tiny splinters flying around the classroom. Harry dropped his hand, his expression never changing all the while. Satisfied, he wheeled himself out of the classroom and back to Hermione's worrying expressions.

"Avada Kedavra."

The body collapsed on the ground in front of the group of Death Eaters. Some of them winced at the sound, no doubt fearing they were next in Voldemort's internal inquisition. A semi-circle of less than a dozen Death Eaters were standing in Voldemort's inner chamber, their bodies visibly tense as their master continued to relentlessly pace in front of them.

"MacNair," Voldemort said the dead man's name in an almost melodic whisper.

Bellatrix stood behind the Dark Lord, assessing the other Death Eater's reactions. Though it was difficult to see their expressions with their heads bowed so low, their tiny flinches and slight shuffling of their feet was enough to give away their discomfort. Voldemort continued to pace in front of them, his wand tapping his free hand in the beat of a steady metronome. It was an acoustic countdown for Voldemort's next kill.

"MacNair is dead because he cannot find me that traitor Snape. Would anyone else wish to fail at this task?"

"No," the group murmured.

"It is egregious enough that your incompetence has lead to the capture of your fellow peers. Yet you can't bother to even capture the one who dares turn his back on me at this pivotal time? You can't bother to recapture the one who dares defy my will? Severus Snape has fled from our arms and crawled back to that cretin Dumbledore. Find him before you find yourself here," Voldemort pointed at MacNair's dead body.

The Death Eaters took this pause in Voldemort's monologue as an indication to exit the chamber. As they filed out of Voldemort's presence, Bellatrix waved her wand and disposed of MacNair's corpse. As Voldemort sat in his chair and examined the sword of Gryffindor, Bellatrix approached him.

"My Lord, you know that I am with you until the very end, but is it wise to continue punishing the failures of our Death Eaters with death? There are very few of us left since the Battle of Hogwarts," Bellatrix dared to question her master's logic.



"Bella, you're all I've ever needed," Voldemort hissed.

Bella's knees almost buckled at his admission, a heat pouring over her in pulsating waves. Her face was neatly composed, though, as she nodded at her master's confession. Determined to return the sort of desire that her master evidently possessed for her, Bellatrix promised the Dark Lord that she would find the traitor Snape and return the turncoat to her master.

"There's no need for you to find him, Bella. I am sure that the rest of them will die on their quest to retrieve Snape from Dumbledore's lap. It's only a matter of time before our numbers will have dwindled to a paltry handful."

"But, why? Should we not strengthen our forces with your imminent raising of the tower?" Bella asked in confusion.

"When the tower is raised, there will be no need for them. You and Bates are the only ones who will survive the purge," Voldemort admitted.

"You," Bellatrix realized, "You've been systematically killing or getting rid of the rest of the Death Eaters. But why? I still don't understand, my Lord. Why rid yourself of your followers? Surely you will not be able to capture the minds of the corrupted Mudblood lovers."

"I confess that there will be very few in wizarding Britain that will follow me. Fear me? Yes. But follow me? Unlikely."

"Will you be that powerful when the tower is raised? Will you be powerful enough to conquer everyone with just Bates and I at your side?" Bellatrix whispered in reverent awe.

"No, I will not," Voldemort admitted again.

"Then who is to do your bidding besides the creatures already in our employ? They are not enough," Bellatrix pressed on.

"Calm, Bella," Voldemort smoothly intoned, "The wizarding world is not the only source of followers for Lord Voldemort."

"I don't follow," Bellatrix frowned slightly as her mind calculated the Dark Lord's words.

Voldemort eyed her thoughtfully, "Perhaps it's time for a little education."

Harry was sitting in the Gryffindor Common Room, idly eating a snack and scribbling notes into several pieces of parchment. It was late into the evening, nearing midnight, yet Harry was wide awake. He sat on one of the larger couches of the room, his arm slung across the right armrest as he examined some of his work. To his left, Hermione was busy doing homework for Charms or something of that nature. Harry did not care for her busywork at this moment.

He could see Hermione quietly stealing looks at him out of the corner of her eye. Every so and often, when she thought he wasn't looking, she would take a peek at his notes. Fortunately, Harry had set up the notes behind a small pile of books so it would be nearly impossible to read them unless you specifically asked. Harry knew that Hermione would respect his privacy enough not to ask, but her curiosity tended to overrule any of her other emotions. As he watched Hermione take another peek, he shifted the books so they obviously covered his notes. It was a not so subtle indication telling her to back off. She frowned and looked at him openly, her eyes trying to catch his attention. As Harry steadfastly refused to acknowledge her, she finally coughed to pull his attention away from his work.

"Harry? How are you feeling today?" she asked in a straight-forward voice.

"Angry."

Hermione sighed as this response was Harry's answer for the past week or so. Harry continued to remain withdrawn following the death of his parents. Hermione did everything she could to remain by his side, but as the week wore on, Harry found ways to escape her grasp. Worried that she might be smothering him, Hermione backed off and only reached Harry in less obvious ways. He was starting to function more; he worked and answered questions in class, but the same dead look in his eyes remained. Only late at night, when mostly everyone was in bed, did Harry regain the life in his eyes as he continued to work on this mysterious project of his.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I'm just angry."

Harry's replies were succinct and final. No amount of arguing or debating could relieve him of this anger and frankly, Hermione wasn't about to try to circumvent said anger. She had no idea how she would react if her parents died and so she simply did her best to support Harry. At the same time, she knew he had to make some sort of progress. If anger was the next step in his progression through grief, then she would help him work through it until he moved on.

"Who are you angry at?"

"Voldemort."

Hermione noticed that Harry suddenly lost the fear to say his name. Before, Harry would flinch or at least hesitate when he heard or tried to say the Dark Lord's name. But now, Harry simply said it in a very ordinary manner. Hermione did not quite know what triggered the sudden change in his reluctance to say his name, but she was proud. It would not do Harry any good to continue fearing Voldemort's name.

"I'd be angry at Voldemort too," she insisted.

"You don't quite have a grasp of how angry I am at Voldemort," Harry said, his voice chilling the air around him. Hermione could feel the temperature drop in the room as Harry's jaw tightened and the fingers around the quill squeezed the offending object so hard that a few feathers fell out of end.

"Tell me," Hermione gulped, "Let me know."

Harry turned to her, his eyes inquisitive as he took in her insistent face. After a pause, he turned away, his face hidden from her.

"You don't want to know how it feels, Hermione. It's better off that you just keep to yourself."

"Can't really keep to myself. I'm a bit inquisitive by nature," Hermione replied.

"Well I hope you don't ever know how this feels. It's not pretty," Harry said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Somehow I don't think I'll have a say in the matter," she said in a soft whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"The War is coming, Harry," she wrung her arms nervously, "I'm not ever one who relies on hunches or feelings, but I can feel the War growing. Voldemort attacked Hogwarts and took the sword for a reason. He wanted the sword so bad that he left Neville and Dumbledore just to retrieve it. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

Hermione tried a different approach to coax Harry out of his shell. She mentioned the topic of Voldemort, and inadvertently his part in Harry's parent's deaths, in hopes that she could skirt around the topic enough for Harry to bring up his parent's death on his own. It would not do him any good for Hermione to forcibly pull the subject out of him.

"It's been odd for me the whole time. I don't understand what he would want with the sword," Harry clearly had thought of Voldemort's sudden insistence for the sword before.

"I mean it is one of the two lasting relics of the Founders, but it really serves no significance," Hermione accepted Harry's reluctance to talk about his parents for now.

"Does it really? I remember reading a book on how Gryffindor's sword is special in various ways. It assimilates the properties of those it slays. It also was Godric's most prized possession. It had to be his most prized possession for a reason," Harry mused.

"It was created for him by goblins. Goblin magic is quite strong though regular wizards are quick to shun them away to the mines and the tunnels," Hermione wrinkled her nose as she was quickly reminded of wizarding prejudice.

"I know, but I don't think that's why it's important. Voldemort must need it for something. It's what that something is that I don't know," Harry started piling his papers into one neat stack, an indication that he was finished with his work.

"Stay with me," Hermione said, hoping her voice didn't sound like a plead. "Neville's due to be back at any moment from his lessons with Dumbledore."

Harry shrugged and sat back down, "What does he do in these lessons anyways?"

"This is his first one. I doubt it would be anything in rigorous magical training. Dumbledore said that Neville wouldn't even need his wand," Hermione had been thinking of various things that Dumbledore could teach Neville that did not require her friend to have a wand.

Before she could postulate another theory, the portrait opened and a beleaguered Neville stumbled inside as he messily closed the portrait behind him. His face was pale and his posture sagging as he spotted Harry and Hermione sitting by the fire. He heaved himself down between Harry and Hermione as he closed his eyes and laid his head back against the couch. Harry and Hermione exchanged slight looks of concern over his head as Neville exhaled loudly.

"That bad?" Harry asked.

"No - maybe - I don't - I wasn't expecting that," Neville finally settled on an answer.

"What happened? What did Dumbledore do?" Hermione leaned forward in curiosity.

Neville opened his mouth to answer but shut it as his eyes flickered over to Harry. Harry caught the slight look and stood up in response. Hermione caught on and immediately stood up as well.

"No, Harry can stay for this," she stated firmly.

"It's alright," Harry's face was guarded, "I understand."

"No, it's not like that..." Neville trailed off.

"Harry, stay," Hermione ordered.

Harry's eyes narrowed at Hermione's rather firm request. Hermione's eyes widened at Harry's sudden anger, but she stood her ground nonetheless.

"I think Harry's been through enough to know what Dumbledore's been teaching you, Neville," she looked pointedly at Neville.

"You're right," Neville nodded, "Get Ron down here, will you Harry? Everyone needs to hear this."

Harry nodded and exchanged a brief look with Hermione before walking up the stairs and retrieving the dozing Weasley. He was slightly grumpy as he stumbled down the stairs but was wide awake when Neville recounted his meeting with Dumbledore. All ears were at attention as Neville told the story of Voldemort, his mother and father, and these objects called Horcruxes.

"He split his soul up six times? Six?" Ron asked incredulously, "How is that even possible?"

"But he wanted seven," Hermione pointed out, "Seven is always a good, balanced number. Wizards and even Muggles believe in the importance of the number seven. How come he failed?"

Neville pointed at his head or more specifically his scar, "I beat him."

"He wanted to make a seventh one on the night he came over to your house?" Ron asked, his jaw agape.

"That's right, but he failed," Neville responded.

"And so Dumbledore theorized that he wanted Gryffindor's sword to make his seventh Horcrux. It makes sense! After all, you said that Dumbledore said that Voldemort likes trophies. Gryffindor's sword would be the jewel of his collection," Hermione concluded.

"Not exactly," Neville frowned, "Dumbledore didn't mention anything about that. He just gave me a very quick lesson on all the Horcruxes. Oh - and he's teaching me Occlumency."

"To block out Voldemort?" Harry asked, his expression curious.

"Mostly."

Hermione frowned and fidgeted with the ends of her bushy hair, "The question remains: why would Voldemort need the sword?"

"Dumbledore wouldn't say. Whatever it is, it has him scared," Neville informed them.

Harry abruptly stood and gathered most of his notes. The trio looked at him curiously as he held the pieces of parchment to his chest. He started to turn towards the staircase before realizing that the Trio were still staring at him.

"Oh - um - it's getting late. I'm sorry, Neville - oh - I'll see all of you tomorrow," Harry said as he retreated to the staircase.

Harry disappeared without another word, much to the puzzlement of the rest of the Gryffindors. Ron yawned and bid good-bye to Hermione and Neville as well, telling both of them that he would see them at breakfast the next morning. As Ron also vanished from the Common Room, Hermione twisted about to check her surroundings. Once satisfied, she retrieved a piece of fallen parchment from the underneath the table. Neville looked at her curiously as she picked it up and turned it over, examining its contents.

"Hermione, what is that?" Neville asked.

"It's one of Harry's papers. He's been writing and scribbling on them all week, but he won't let me or anyone else have a look," Hermione continued to look curiously at the parchment, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Well, what is it then?" Neville questioned again.

Hermione wordlessly handed the parchment to Neville. As Neville turned the parchment so he could see the image in the correct orientation, he found that it was a sketch. A sketch of a tall, dark tower.

Harry walked into the Defense classroom the next morning and found a curious witch with shockingly pink hair standing in the front of the room. As he squinted his eyes to focus his view, he realized

that he recognized Tonks from the Order. She caught his eye and winked at him as he took his seat. Harry turned to Hermione to ask her whether or not she knew anything of Tonks' sudden appointment as teacher but found her to be distractedly talking to Neville. A slight tinge of disappointment overcame him, but it was quickly squashed out as Tonks commanded attention.

"Hello everyone. I'm Professor Tonks and I'll be filling in for the short remainder of the year. I understand that most of you know how to hold your own," Tonks started.

The class murmured appreciatively at the slight comment by the teacher. Raising one open palm in the air, Tonks ordered for quiet and received it right away.

"So I won't go through any pleasantries or reviews. Frankly, I'm here because the Ministry is driving up the effort to train the students for their own protection. I know I'm no Sheppard, but I'll do your best to have you prepared," Tonks waved her wand and banished the remaining desks around the area.

"Prepared for what?" a voice called out from the back of the class.

Tonks hesitated during her wand movements but regained her composure, "I confess that the Ministry is looking to increase their numbers. Since most, if not all, of you showed extreme aptitude in the face of danger, all of you are the most likely to be picked for the Minister's Army. I'm here to assess your strengths and weaknesses."

There was a slight grumbling at being forced to join the Minister's Army. The grumbling was the loudest in the Gryffindor section as they were still bitter over Ginny's sudden departure at Fudge's request. Tonks gave them a sympathetic look.

"I know it's not easy hearing this, but I figured that all of you should know. Voldemort's attack on Hogwarts has only further enraged Fudge. He's calling for all sorts of arms to defeat Voldemort at any cost, including recruiting more and more teenagers. You didn't hear me say this, but I don't necessarily agree," Tonks earnestly spoke to her class.



"Why don't you agree? I feel as if we can all handle ourselves well," Ernie pompously stated.

"Do you now?" Tonks raised an eyebrow.

"Well," Ernie looked around at his classmates, "Yes, I do believe."

"Good, Mr..."

"MacMillan."

"Ernie MacMillan," Tonks pointed at his name on her attendance sheet, "You get to be my first demonstration. Up front."

Ernie stood after some urges from his mates and made his way to the front of the class. Tonks had cleared out an area not unlike Sheppard used to create during dueling sessions. As Tonks produced her own wand, it was clear that something close to that scenario was about to occur.

"Now, I know Sheppard has taught you very well in arena and field combat. He's taught you to use your surroundings and think ahead. Yet, against wizards, you will mostly face them in one-on-one battles. Thus, it is important to realize what you can and what you can't do against a Death Eater. It's easier to fight together, but you must know how to handle yourself alone as well," Tonks bowed to indicate the start of the duel.

Ernie raised his arm to cast a spell but found that his wand was already slipping out of his hand and flying into Tonks. Tonks had barely moved but Harry caught the slight movement in her arm as soon as Ernie finished bowing. It was almost imperceptible to the human eye, but the slight flick of her fingers was unmistakable to Harry. His father had taught him the technique well. Harry gnashed his teeth as the sudden reminder erupted several motions within him. He did not even hear Ernie sputtering at the sudden defeat until several moments later.

"Fighting together is easy. Fighting one-on-one is hard," Tonks repeated, "So while I certainly admire your bravery in the face of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, make no mistake; you are still just kids. You will need the proper training and I need to assess all of your talents."

"I will assign pairs in a moment to determine who you're going to duel. For now, you are not allowed to use any environment-altering charms for your benefit. This is strict dueling," Tonks summoned a piece of parchment and started listing off names.

As Tonks was assigning pairs, Harry absent-mindedly reached up to his neck and stroked the pebble. Hermione reminded him that his parents had given it to him as some sort of last gift from their Will. Truthfully, Harry did not know what purpose the pebble served but if his parents wanted him to wear it, he would wear it until the day he died. Harry was zoned out as he continued to touch the pebble and only Hermione's jostling forced him back to reality.

"Harry, you're with Nott," Hermione said to him.

Harry nodded, still not quite focused as he stood to greet Nott. The pairs split up into different parts of the classroom as they started their warm-up for their eventual duels against each other. As Harry cast a couple of easy jinxes against a target dummy, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to see Tonks standing close to him.

"Harry, a word?"

Harry nodded and walked off into a corner, "Hey Tonks."

"Hi Harry," she smiled at him but had a worried look in her eyes, "This is awkward for me to ask this question, but it's procedure. Are you fit to duel? Will you be okay with it?"

"I'm fine, Tonks."

Tonks regarded him carefully and chose her next words wisely, "Harry...a lot of my friends and colleagues have died during the War already. There's a couple of people that their family have seen in order to...help them during these sort of times. Would you like for me to recommend you someone?"

Harry's eyes turned blank once again as his voice took on a decidedly formal tone, "No, thank you. I'll manage."

Tonks worriedly looked back at him but knew no amount of talking on her part would convince the stubborn boy otherwise. Nodding,

she patted him on the back and sent him back to Nott to warm-up for their duel. After a few minutes of mindlessly hexing the target dummy with easy jinxes, Tonks called for the class to gather round and pay attention for the first duel. Harry tuned them out and turned to the window to see the large monument built for the deaths at the Battle of Hogwarts.

A large, white monolith stood at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, a reminder of the light against the darkness. Harry remembered attending his parent's funeral just a few days before. He declined to speak, knowing no words could possibly describe the grief and anger he felt. Every single object was just another reminder of his parents. Each object sent different emotions coursing through his veins but the end product was always the same. He felt anger. Pure, unadulterated hate and anger at Voldemort. It was threatening to burst from within at any moment.

Harry clenched his hands as he replayed his father's last acts to help them escape. How noble it was for James to defend his wife and son against the Dark Lord. How foolish he was not to accept Harry's help. These thoughts ran through Harry's mind as he continued to grow angrier and angrier at Voldemort and the rest of the damn Death Eaters. Suddenly, a hand was softly placed over his. He turned his head to see Hermione writing notes about the duel with one hand and placing her other hand over his in a soothing manner.

She squeezed his hand tightly and muttered out of the corner of her mouth, "Calm down, Harry. I can feel the magic pouring off you."

Harry nodded, hearing her warning loud and clear. He fought to clear his mind but only continued to feel the anger pulsing through his veins. It was only after an extensive battle within his own head that Harry finally found himself in a more stoic area. He could still feel the after burns of hatred residing in his chest, but Hermione had let go of his hand to indicate that he was no longer affecting the area with his magic. As the rest of the duels played out, Harry finally heard his name being called into the ring.

Harry stood from his chair and accepted the good luck murmured by Hermione. He nodded to Tonks to indicate that he was good to go once he entered the dueling circle. Bowing low to Nott, Harry went on the defensive. He deflected two harmless jinxes and lazily

conjured a lasso to throw around Nott's ankles. Nott deftly dodged them and surprised Harry with a rather quick Disarming charm. Harry felt the wand leave his hand slightly before snapping back into place.

"I forgot. Stupid holster," Nott groaned aloud, much to the class's amusement.

Harry immediately and quickly disarmed him, not wishing for the duel to go on any longer. Nott nodded at him with a look of annoyance on his face. He clearly did not care for Harry's advantage when it came to defending against the Expelliarmus.

"Good on you, Potter. I've been told of your special wand holster. Perhaps you'd care to share it with the rest of us?" Tonks asked.

"Can't. Gift from a good friend," Harry caught Hermione's eyes as his lips quirked ever so slightly. She did return his attempt at a smile but instead scowled at him.

"Well, good show as it is. We'll go more again tomorrow class. Make sure to be prepared to duel more in singles. It requires a different mindset and a different set of skills that what you're used to so far."

As the class exited, Harry found himself being hurriedly pulled along the hallway by Hermione. Harry attempted to pry her hands off of his upper arm, but it was no use; the girl was determined. Dragging him into an empty classroom, she rounded him with a disappointed look on her face.

"You didn't have the wand holster," she stated.

"Yes I did."

"No you didn't because you haven't gotten it back from me. I still have it, Harry," she informed him.

Harry shrugged dismissively, "Okay, I don't have it."

"That's it?"

"That's what?"

"You don't have it. That's all you have to say! You just performed more wandless magic at the blink of an eye and lied to Tonks about it," Hermione was quite upset.

"It's not anything I haven't done before," Harry coolly replied.

"Harry," she sighed in frustration, "Maybe you should talk to someone about this. I don't mean to bring up a sore subject but I saw you after - well after..."

"After what Hermione?"

"After," she bit her lip, "After your Mum died, I saw you do something I've never seen before."

Harry was quiet as Hermione breached the topic explicitly for the first time. He knew that Hermione was practically hopping on her tip toes in her eagerness to help him. While he knew that she was genuinely trying to help him, the selfish part of his mind answered instead.

"Don't talk about my Mum."

"But Harry," she jumped as Harry interrupted her rather forcefully.

"Don't but Harry me," Harry scoffed, "I can control my magic and I don't need you bringing up my Mum or trying to help me through this anymore, Hermione. I can take care of it myself."

"Harry," there were tears in her eyes at this point, "I'm just trying to help you. I need to help you."

"You are helping me, Hermione. You've helped me every day," Harry took one of her hands in his and stroked the back of her hand with his thumb.

"But this is something I need to do myself. This is something that I have to take care of," he placed special emphasis on himself as he spoke.

"If you asked me before this year started, I would have never imagined myself in this position with you. I would have never imagined asking you to give me some space yet here we are. You're

a wonderful human being, Hermione, not just a wonderful witch. But I need you to let me go through with this alone," Harry looked her straight in the eyes as he spoke, trying to convey the burden that was strung across his neck.

There was a pause as Hermione soaked in his words. She suddenly surprised him and tip toed to peck him lightly on the lips. It was just a soft kiss, not one of deep, yearning passion nor one filled with overwhelming desire. The kiss was just a promise.

"I respect your decision, Harry. I'll give you some space, but don't expect me to go away. Ever."

Hermione swept out of the room without another word, leaving Harry to touch his lips and for the first time in a while, smile bemusedly at Hermione's dramatic exit.

Peter Pettigrew crawled along the rat-infested sewers of underground London. He wiggled his way through a couple of the smaller holes in his Transfigured form as he continued to navigate in the dark. It was definitely not Peter's greatest wish to be crawling in these dank conditions, but the Dark Lord requested it so and Peter would never deny the Dark Lord's wishes.

As he squeezed out of another sewage line, Peter fell out to find himself in a carved out tunnel. By the smoothness of the edges and the generally Muggle-ness feel of the tunnel, Peter determined that this tunnel was the one that some of his compatriots had dug out recently. Pulling his falling trousers so the waist line was at the appropriate level, Peter tip toed through the water, avoiding rats and bugs and other assorted creatures that dwelled in the underground.

He continued down the tunnel, his wand lighting the path in front of him. The tunnel winded around several turns and corners before it suddenly opened into a giant atrium. Peter's jaw dropped as he looked up and was unable to see the ceiling with the dim light of his wand. Gulping, he realized that this large dome was the location his master required. Tapping the dirty hat he brought along with him, Peter made a Portkey and sat down, awaiting his master's arrival. As predicted, the Portkey suddenly shook as it was activated from the other end. In the blink of an eye, Voldemort and Bellatrix were standing in the giant atrium. Peter scrambled to his feet and wiped the dirt off his clothes in an effort to look maintained.

"My Lord," Peter bowed.

"Rise, Peter," Voldemort encouraged with a sick smile on his face, "It is time for you to serve your master."

Peter nodded and extended his hand. Voldemort summoned the sword out of his robes and carefully handed the hilt to Peter. Peter gracefully accepted the sword, the weight of it weighing down his one undamaged arm. The Basilisk poison infected his severed arm to the point of no return. As Peter dragged the sword through the dirt, he finally found the required spot in the atrium. Turning back, Peter looked at Voldemort to confirm he was in the correct spot. Voldemort nodded.

Peter took a deep breathe as he found the small indent in the ground where the sword would need to be inserted. Voldemort informed him that neither he nor Bella would be able to perform the ceremony since they were both...tainted. Peter, on the other hand, could perform the ceremony and please his master greatly. Peter was grateful to accept the task. Anything to please the Dark Lord.

Peter plunged the sword into the small ditch in the ground. Nothing happened for a moment, but Peter found himself unable to remove his hands from the sword. He turned questioningly to Voldemort but found that his master was intently focused on the sword. The sword started to glow, starting from the very tip and spreading all the way to the hilt. Peter watched it glow but was still unable to remove his hands from the sword.

"My Lord! I can't - I can't move my hands!" Peter exclaimed as a burning sensation started to spread throughout his hands.

"Do not let go, Peter," Voldemort ordered as he brandished his wand.

Peter grit his teeth as the pain started to grow. He could feel a slight rumbling beneath his feet but paid no attention to it as the burning sensation continued to heat up where his hands held the sword. A low moan was emerging from his mouth as Peter struggled to pry his hands off the sword.

"My Lord! I can't! I must let go!" Peter attempted to pull away from the sword but found himself unable to.

"I know," Voldemort simply replied.

Peter suddenly felt the pain jolt his body and bring him to his knees. It filled very sensation and every fiber of his being as more and more pain overcame him. He was dimly aware that an actual fire was spreading on his skin, originating from where his hands held the sword. Peter screamed in agony as the fire consumed him, the blaze toasting his skin and destroying his nerve endings. Peter continued to scream, the echo in the empty atrium making the effect even louder. Soon, Peter gave in to the fire as he crumpled to the ground, his hands still holding the sword. The majority of his body was burnt beyond humanly and magical repair, his eyes welding shut and the smell of burning flesh filling the air. Yet, Peter was still alive.

Voldemort approached him as the fire died down around Peter's body. Peter moaned nonsense as he felt the vibrations of his master's feet pad along the ground. He continued to moan as Voldemort inspected the sword. He smiled gleefully as he watched the sword continue to glow and pulsate different colors.

"This is it, Bella. Tomorrow night, as the moon turns, I will raise the tower of the Founders and claim a power so great that I will finally be able to crush my opposition," Voldemort laughed in an almost childlike manner.

"I am pleased, my Lord," Bellatrix sank to her knees and kissed the hem of his robes.

"Rise, Bella. We will come back tomorrow as the tower rises," Voldemort walked away from the atrium, sneaking glances back at the sword in deep elation.

"What of Pettigrew?" Bellatrix asked, turning back to the rotten, burnt corpse of a man.

"Let him rot."

Several country sides away, Harry Potter and the rest of Hogwarts pulled the blankets over their heads as they succumbed to their slumber.



Harry was standing in the owlery, watching an owl fly off into the distance with his letter. The blot became smaller and smaller against the rising sun, eventually fading from view. As the owl disappeared, Harry turned to walk down the winding staircase back to the castle. Weaving through the crowd of students preparing for breakfast and classes, Harry finally arrived at the Gryffindor portrait and answered the appropriate password. Stepping inside, he was surprised to find Neville sitting with Hermione and Ron. All three of them had shocked expressions on their face as they sat in a statuesque manner on the couch.

"Guys, what's wrong?" Harry asked as he approached the trio.

They exchanged worried and surprised glances. After a moment, it was Hermione who shakily replied, "Dumbledore's dying."

Harry froze in his tracks, halfway to the Trio. He looked at them in concern, questioning the merit of this statement, but knew none of them were the type to pull off this sort of joke. They were still regarding him in equal or greater amounts of stunned shock as Harry took a seat next to them.

"Dying?" Harry whispered.

Neville nodded numbly, his expression still crest-fallen as he stared blankly into the dying embers of the fire. Harry felt sorry for Neville. While he respected and admired Dumbledore, Harry didn't have the same connection with Dumbledore that Neville had. To Neville, Dumbledore was the only father figure in his life.

"He told me last night," Neville droned, "He just brought it up like it was nothing and said I had to finish what he started."

"The Horcruxes?" Harry asked.

"He wants me to finish it..." Neville trailed off.

"We'll help you," Hermione insisted as she wrapped an arm around his shoulder. Ron followed suit on Neville's other side as they sought for comfort in each other's arms. Harry was quietly sitting off to the side, caught up in his thoughts as he stared out the window. Dumbledore dying? How could Dumbledore be dying?

"...it was the ring. Dumbledore said that destroying the Horcrux in the ring caused something to happen to him. The break in his leg isn't healing right because of the effects of the curse. He wanted me to know - he wanted - he wanted to make sure that I destroy the rest of the Horcruxes," Neville stammered his way through his sentence.

"I don't think I'm going to come back next year," Neville suddenly stated.

"What? What do you mean you're not going to come back?" Hermione pulled back from him with an astonished expression.

"If Dumbledore's dying, I need to finish this quickly. It's up to me after all, isn't it?" Neville asked rhetorically, "The faster I destroy the Horcruxes, the quicker I can end all of this."

"Hold on a second, mate," Ron started.

"No, I've - I've made up my mind," Neville looked between his friends as they looked back at him with matching faces of incredulity.

"Neville, think about this. You need to stay here. You can't just go wandering about with the War going on!" Hermione pleaded.

"I won't have anymore people dying because I'm taking too long," Neville's eyes met Harry's briefly, a clear reminder of the cost of living.

"I think he's right," Harry quietly said.

"Harry, you can't really think that!" Hermione turned to him, her frustration with the boys increasing.

"You have to do what you have to do to end this. I know if I got the chance, I would," Harry defended himself fiercely.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply but couldn't find the words to contradict his statement. She turned back to Neville and pleaded for him to stay, "We can do this from Hogwarts. It's safer here! We have more resources here!"

"They'll restrict our movement here as well. We can't go wandering about searching the countryside. Dumbledore promised me that this

can only stay between us; what do you think they're going to ask when Dumbledore dies. When Dumbledore dies..." Neville repeated his last statement as if he couldn't quite believe he just said that.

"We don't need to stay here. The lot of good a bunch of books are going to do us when we come up against a Horcrux. Neville got the diary by himself and that bloody thing was inside of Hogwarts," Ron pointed out.

Hermione felt defeated as she desperately looked back and forth between her two best friends. Turning to Harry, she pleaded through her eyes for his reasoning. Unfortunately for her, Harry was not going to acquiesce to her request.

"I'll support you guys all the way," Harry encouraged them quietly.

Hermione sighed in a manner that almost sounded like a growl. Her shoulders sagged in defeat as she realized that no one was going to take her side. She looked between all of them and admitted, "I guess we're going then."

A silence fell over the group as they stewed in their own thoughts. Harry was sure that had he been in the same position, he would have immediately left Hogwarts to search for the Horcruxes. Why bother wasting time at school when so many lives were on the line? Why wait for the inevitable attack on Hogwarts?

"So Madame Pomfrey can't do anything about it?" Hermione asked.

"He says she can't. He said that Snape was able to buy him some time but it's running out," Neville replied.

"Snape?"

"Yeah, Snape," Neville shrugged, "He's a git but apparently he helped Dumbledore."

"He's been missing," Harry added.

"You're right, I haven't seen him at any of the breakfasts or dinners lately," Hermione frowned in thought.

"Forget about Snape," Ron interjected, "If we're going to go, we should go when we're let out. I reckon my Mum's not going to be too happy about all of this, so I think it's best we just leave on a blinder."

"I'd feel bad for not letting your family know," Neville guiltily admitted.

"You'd feel bad anyways," Ron brushed it off, "At least this way, we're free to go as soon as we like."

"Are you coming with us Harry?" Hermione asked as she turned to person in question.

Truthfully, Harry didn't expect them to ask him to come along. Indeed, Neville and Ron looked surprised that Hermione would invite him on such a dangerous quest. After all, it was always the Trio that completed the tasks. It was always the Trio that needed to save the world. The sudden inclusion of Harry, while not offensive outright, was at least surprising to the other two-thirds of the Trio.

"If you'll have me," Harry regarded Neville and Ron carefully.

Neville's eyes flicked over to Hermione uncomfortably. It was obvious that Ron would not be the one to make the decision as he looked at Neville expectantly. On Hermione's part, she looked at Neville with a different sort of expectancy as he continually shifted his eyes from Hermione to Harry. Once or twice, Harry thought he detected a flash of...something...but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. After a few moments, Neville nodded his head slowly.

"You'd be a great help," Neville said to Harry.

Harry accepted his words gracefully, only nodding slightly back to indicate that he would agree to join this dangerous journey. Despite Neville's allowance, Harry still felt as if he were the odd man out. Ron only reacted to Neville's agreement with a slight nodding of his head. Hermione, on the other hand, was beaming as she looked back and forth between Neville and Harry.

"Thank you," Hermione said to Harry. At the same time, he knew that she was thankful that Neville allowed for Harry's participation as well.

"How many Horcruxes are left?" Hermione drew a leaf of parchment and immediately started writing several columns and lists.

"What's that?" Ron asked.

"If we're going to be roaming out the countryside, it would do as well to have a plan. It would also help to keep things organized for a four person traveling group," Hermione stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Four. There should be four," Neville answered, "The cup, the locket, and two more things that we don't know. Dumbledore said he would help me with the locket but after that..." Neville trailed off again.

Hermione gulped, "So we have to find three, but we only know the true identity of one of them."

"That would be correct."

"Hmmm," Hermione wrinkled her nose, "Since Voldemort likes trophies, I still stand by my statement that the sword would be one Horcrux and then something of Ravenclaw's to complete the collection. That would leave just one more item -"

Hermione suddenly stopped as the portrait door swung open. She hurriedly stuffed the parchments in her bag as Professor McGonagall glided in, her eyes fixed on just one person.

"Mr. Potter. Professor Dumbledore would like to see you," she said, her face stern but unrevealing.

"Okay," Harry looked confusedly at Neville, but the other boy was equally bewildered.

"Now, Mr. Potter," McGonagall ordered as Harry dragged his feet along.

Hermione mouthed to Harry that they would meet him after his meeting. Harry nodded as he fell in step behind McGonagall. As they navigated through the corridors, Harry had the distinct feeling he was being led to an execution. McGonagall's posture was tense and she did not speak to him in the entirety of the trip to the Headmaster's office. Speaking the password, she stepped out of the

way and indicated with a slight movement of her head that Harry should ascend the stairs into the office.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall called out as Harry placed his foot on the first step.

"Yes?" Harry said, turning around to face her.

With a grim look on her face, McGonagall said, "I knew your parents very well, Mr. Potter. No matter what happens, they both would be very proud of you. Both of them."

"I know," Harry simply replied, turning around to climb the winding staircase.

Opening the door, Harry found that Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, his arms crossed on the desk in front of him. The robes were pulled over his hands, so Harry could not see his damaged hand from his point of view. Dumbledore's smile did not reach his eyes as he motioned for Harry to sit in the chair opposite from him. Harry tentatively sat down, eyeing the Headmaster warily but also with a sizable amount of pity. Dumbledore easily picked up on Harry's expression.

"I assume that Mr. Longbottom informed you of my condition," Dumbledore was to the point.

"He did. I'm so very sorry Professor," Harry confirmed Dumbledore's belief.

"Do not be sorry for me, Harry. I have lived a long life. Far too long than I should have lived. My only regret is that I won't be here to help you or your friends for much longer," Dumbledore looked purposefully at Harry. Not knowing whether or not he should respond out loud, Harry simply nodded back to him.

"I do not wish about me for any longer. I have brought you here for a different reason," Dumbledore looked quite serious as he opened a drawer with one of his hands. Harry could briefly see a flash of his damaged hand as he withdrew the other hand from the folds of his robes. Harry reverted his eyes back to Dumbledore's face as the Professor emerged with something in his outstretched hand.

A blue envelope.

Harry could hear Dumbledore speaking but heard the older man's voice as if he were speaking through a pillow. The aged wizard's voice barely registered in Harry's ears as the young man continued to look at the periwinkle, blue envelope.

"I regret to inform you that the Ministry has deemed it fit to request you of your services."

The envelope was odd at this close distance. Harry, of course, had never seen one up close. The blue shading seemed much brighter and Harry could spot the insignia of the Minister's Army sealed across the flap. It seemed heavy in Dumbledore's hand as if there something more in it besides a letter. It occurred to Harry that he did not see the contents of Ginny's own letter. What was inside the envelope?

"I wish I had more power to stop this sort of behavior from the Minister, but alas I cannot. The public grows more fearful every day of Voldemort's power and the Minister uses that paranoia to push more and more into his army."

Perhaps there was something other than a letter attached inside. Perhaps it was a portkey to immediately bring you to the location of your training. No. Harry distinctly remembered Ginny departing with two Ministry officials. If it was not a portkey, what was inside the envelope? Perhaps Harry was imagining things. Perhaps the letter simply looked heavy in Dumbledore's hand because the Professor was dying.

"I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry looked up at Dumbledore, finally hearing him clearly for the first time. Without hesitating, Harry snatched the letter out of Dumbledore's hand. The old man looked mildly surprised at Harry's sudden movement, but Harry thought nothing of it. He simply tucked the letter into the side pocket of his jacket.

"It's okay," Harry replied.

Dumbledore cocked his head and looked at the teenager through his half-moon spectacles, "You seem to be taking this quite well."

"Anything to help."

Dumbledore's face fell. He obviously did not like Harry's short answer. Sighing, Dumbledore leaned forward and stared straight at Harry, "Harry. I know that you wish for revenge. I know that you wish to bring those who are responsible to justice. Do not let this vengeance overcome you. I have seen great men tore down to pieces in the name of revenge. You will grow up and be a wise and powerful wizard. I can sense it in you. Don't let this darkness overtake you."

Harry felt something adrift in his head. He felt as if something were poking it, trying to access it's contents. Harry didn't appreciate this invasion one bit and forcefully slammed the investigator out of his mind. Dumbledore only gave a tiny flinch to indicate that there was something amiss. Harry stood up and though he felt guilty for addressing the dying Headmaster in this manner, he regarded him coolly nonetheless.

"Thank you, Professor, but I know what I'm doing."

As Harry prepared to leave the office, he was suddenly struck with a thought. Stopping and turning on a six-pence, he asked one more question for the aging Headmaster.

"Professor, what's the dark tower?"

Immediately, Dumbledore's face clouded and he looked almost angry at Harry. His usual twinkling, blue eyes suddenly became icy and harsh.

"Where did you hear that?"

Harry shrugged noncommittally, "I saw it when I got a glance into Voldemort's mind."

Dumbledore looked troubled. More troubled than Harry had ever seen him before. He watched the Headmaster's Adam's apple bob as he gulped, "I'm afraid I can't tell you much. The Founders spoke of a dark tower they used in an effort to unite Muggles and Wizards alike when they were alive. It is but a bedside tale."



"Sure it is."

Without another word, Harry turned around and fled from the office. He did not see the Headmaster's forlorn and disconcerted expression as he disappeared down the staircase.

As the sun hovered above the horizon, Harry watched it from his spot in the owlery. The soft hooting of the owls and the slight stench of dead animals didn't deter Harry from his spot. He was content to watch the sun set on the horizon. He heard footsteps behind him but didn't bother to turn around. He could recognize the hurried and insistent patter of steps from a mile away.

"Hey Hermione," Harry said softly without turning around.

"How'd you know it was me?" she asked in confusion.

"You make it a point to stomp with your heels."

"Do I?"

"You've done that ever since your second year when I started noticing you."

"You noticed me back then?" Hermione asked with a bit of incredulity in your voice.

"I suppose," Harry grinned to himself.

He heard Hermione step closer to him and place her chin on his shoulder as she stared at the setting sun. There was a calm quiet as they soaked in the beautiful sight. Though Harry just received a letter that would send him off to war, he never felt so peaceful as he did right now. Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist as she hugged him from behind and continued to watch the sunset.

"What are you going to do?" she asked quietly.

"I'm going to fight."

"You don't have to do this you know," Hermione said in response, "You can come with us. If the Death Eaters can't find us, the Ministry surely isn't."

"You know that's not where I belong."

"What do you mean?" Hermione tugged on his shoulder so she could see his face.

"It's not me. It's just always been the three of you," he truthfully admitted.

"That doesn't mean we don't need your help. That doesn't mean I don't need you."

Harry was silent as he looked at her pleading face. She was begging for his assistance, begging for him to come along. He shakily inhaled the soft scent of her hair, closing his eyes and memorizing the delightful aroma.

"I'm needed somewhere else. I have something that I have to settle and I just...I know you want me to come, but I know they don't."

"They do," Hermione insisted, "They're just used to a certain way. But I know you Harry! I know how much help you can be to us."

"I would just be an outlier, Hermione. Forget being the third wheel, I simply not be on the wheel at all. I can see how he looks at you," Harry finally arrived to the crux of his argument.

"He doesn't look at me like that," Hermione didn't bother to explicitly state the implicated individual.

"He's going to have a lot on his plate. You said it yourself, remember? He needs you even if he doesn't want you to be there," Harry turned her own words against her.

"I need you."

Harry fell silent again as Hermione stood her ground. She crossed her arms and glared at him, the tears welling up in her eyes. Her jaw was set as she delivered the ultimatum. It was her final offering as her own pride refused to bow to Harry's determination. He brought his arm so that it looped behind her head. Bringing her head to his so that their foreheads were touching, Harry looked into her tear-filled eyes and attempted to explain his line of thought.

"When the time comes, Hermione, I will be there. When you really, really need me, I will be there. But you don't need me now. We both have things we need to accomplish. Throwing us in the middle of everything won't do anyone any good if Voldemort is still roaming around."

"Is that it then?" the scorn in her voice evident, "You're just going to run off and hunt down Death Eaters? You can't - nothing - you can't bring them back."

Hermione turned the tables on Harry as she carved out an already open wound in his heart. But Harry simply took it in stride, knowing exactly what she was trying to do.

"I know I can't. They're not coming back. But if I can help bring Voldemort down - and I'll be more help out there than trying to destroy the Horcruxes - then at least - I hope - I'll find some peace," Harry exhaled, the soft whispers of his breath tickling Hermione's nose.

"I hope so too."

They were quiet as they reached an unstated understanding. They simply continued to look at each other, their foreheads touching and their arms encircled one another as the sun lowered below the horizon. As the sun faded from view, the light dimmed until a darkness overcame the land. In the midst of it all were two teenagers set to embark on two separate but intertwining journeys.

Harry closed the two inch gap between their lips and met them softly. His lips rubbed against hers lightly, just a slight brush. She puckered her lips in response, just barely meeting his kiss halfway. They pulled away not three seconds later, the mutual feelings reciprocated.

Michael Henry was angry.

"Lisa, how are we ever going to get to London? They said to take the M6 from Birmingham. Do you even know where that is?"

"I can't do everything with you yelling in my ear the whole time!" Lisa screeched.

"Guys. Shut the fuck up for a second. Just give me the map and I'll find a way out," Jimmy looked between the arguing couple.

Michael, Lisa, and Jimmy were backpacking through Europe. It wasn't all unusual for three Americans fresh out of college. Currently though, they were having trouble navigating the unknown motorways of the United Kingdom.

"Aha! See, I told you I knew where we were going!" Lisa pointed excitedly at the tall clock tower so aptly named Big Ben.

"She has a point, dude."

"Don't fucking 'dude' me, Jimmy. I knew too," Michael steamed in the passenger seat as he refused to admit that his girlfriend was right about the directions.

Jimmy laughed and could only shrug. Bickering was commonplace for the two and Michael didn't take kindly to losing to Lisa.

"Aww, baby. It's okay. Sometimes I get things right too," Lisa cooed condescendingly.

"I'm hungry," Michael stated loudly.

Jimmy and Lisa could only shrug as they pulled into the busy streets of London. They pointed at the landmarks excitedly as they drove in and around the congested streets. They left their car and started to travel around on foot to see all the sites.

"Where do you wanna go?" Michael asked, his grumpiness slightly satiated by some food.

"Hyde Park," Lisa crossed the location off her list of places they needed to go.

"If only we could teleport there," Jimmy groaned as he rubbed his feet, "The walking is killing me."

"We could use magic," Michael wiggled his eyebrows.

"If only such a thing existed," Lisa sighed.

"That'd be really cool. What do you think? Would I need a wand like all the old time wizards or do I just move things by hand," Jimmy started pantomiming in the air with his hands, pretending to move around objects with his invisible telekinesis.

"Wand? No. If they were real wizards or witches, they wouldn't need wands," Michael debated.

"Why not?"

"That's just something people do at Disney. Just because Mickey had a wand in Fantasia doesn't mean actual wizards have a wand."

"You realize that both of you are arguing about a non-existent form of magic and whether or not the wizards would need wands. Why did I go on this trip with both of you?" Lisa looked between them with a disbelieving look on her face.

Jimmy and Michael looked back at her, their eyes questioning.

"So you think they do need a wand..." Jimmy said slowly.

"You're an idiot," Lisa stood up and started walking in the direction of Hyde Park.

Jimmy and Michael erupted in laughter and slapped high fives as they trailed behind her. They eventually snapped her out of her own grumpiness as they enjoyed the fine weather and usual tourist attractions. Eventually, they decided to take a seat on one of the benches. Lisa looped her arms between her boyfriend and her other friend as she sat in between them.

"I hate both of you," Lisa smiled at them.

"You know you love me," Michael casually replied as he closed his eyes and accepted the cool breeze of the night.

"Me too," Jimmy said through a mouthful of food.

Lisa laughed as she unhooked her arms and pulled a map out of her purse.

"So where to next..." Lisa trailed off as the ground suddenly rumbled beneath her.

"What as that?" Michael asked.

"Can London even have earthquakes?" Jimmy bewilderedly wondered.

Another rumble shook the ground and forced a few people to stumble. Everyone looked questioningly at each other as the rumbling continued. It suddenly stopped, causing Lisa, Jimmy, and Michael to look at each other in confusion. The small reprieve was suddenly over as the ground suddenly shook violently. Cracks started appearing below their foot as people scattered in panic.

"Come on!" Michael pulled Lisa by her hand as they sought shelter from this calamity.

Trees were being uprooted from the ground as it continued to shake and crack, the faults becoming more evident as they rumbling grew. The three tourists dodged to and fro as they attempted to maneuver through the falling debris. Out of the corner of his eye, Michael spotted the foundation of a building crumble and give way.

"Away, away!" Michael pulled them in a different direction, away from the falling building.

As Michael turned around to look back at the destructed park, he disbelievingly watched as something rose out of the ground. At first it was just a tiny peak, but then it grew as the ground opened up beneath it. A tall structure shot in the air as if it were being raised by the hand of god himself. Up and up it went, high into the air and higher than any building in London. Michael stumbled and fell, bringing Lisa down with him as stared at the tall, dark tower with a mixed expression of shock and horror. Lisa turned to see what her boyfriend was looking at and her jaw dropped as she took in the sight.

The tower was black and looked to be made of some sort of solidified lava. It kept rising high into the air, easily blotting out the moon and casting everyone in a dark shadow. There seemed to be no entrances or windows of any kind. At the very top was a pointed tower, much like the castles of the Medieval days. The rumbling of

the ground finally stopped as well as the rising of the tower. The visitors of Hyde Park looked at each other as they gaped at the tall, dark tower. Lisa turned to Michael, her eyebrows scrunched in deep confusion.

"What is that?"

Michael still couldn't believe his eyes as he continued to stare at the tower.

"I don't know. I just - I don't know."

End Part 1

## Part 2

"The only verdict is vengeance; a vendetta, held as a votive, not in vain." -V

Nineteen weeks later...

"What the hell is going on?"

The Muggle Prime Minister was practically tearing his rather thinning patch of hair out of his head as he raged at the Ministry of Magic, Cornelius Fudge.

"People are panicking everywhere. I thought you said you had this under control! I thought you said you could contain it! But six months later and there's still this blasted tower in the middle of Hyde Park! This Voldemort - STOP FLINCHING - person is breaking every single rule that holds our worlds apart!"

The Prime Minister snarled his words at his wizarding counterpart. Fudge, on his behalf, only grimaced at the mention of Voldemort's name. Otherwise, he continued on as if the very fabric of their worlds were not being forced to overlap.

"I understand your concern, Minister. I sincerely do. But you must understand, this is unprecedented. No wizard has ever forcibly revealed magic to the Muggle world..."

"There's that word again! Muggle! Why are we Muggles?"

"Because you are," Fudge confusedly replied.

The Prime Minister shook his head at the other man's casual disregard, "Maybe that's why people keep attacking this so called Army of yours," The Minister quoted the word army with his fingers, "There's riot and chaos erupting all around London and you've done nothing to control those wizards of yours. Nothing!"

"Now wait just a minute," Fudge puffed out his chest to defend his own kind, "It's not just regular Muggles attacking the Army. These Muggles have taken to You-Know-Who as if he were some sort of demigod. They're attacking our brave men on You-Know-Who's behalf. Surely you can see that we're on the same side here."



"I don't care," the Muggle Minister hissed, "We need to rid of him. The Americans are pressuring for us to stop this at once. What would you propose me to do? Drop a nuclear bomb in the middle of London?"

"What's a nuclear bomb?"

"You can't be serious!" the Muggle Minister slammed his fist down on his desk, causing a few papers to shuffle about, "Hiroshima? Nagasaki?"

"Oh - oh, I see."

The Prime Minister rubbed his forehead in deep desperation. Every day the tower stood brought both of their worlds to the brink of chaos. Work production ceased to exist as evidenced by the rather lackluster utilities available throughout the city. The lamps flickered in and out and it was not unusual to find generators running apartments and homes. It was constantly gloomy outside as the tower seemed to block out the sun and bring nothing but darkness and thunder.

"Are there any plans in place? Specifics?" the Prime Minister said with his head in his hands.

"There are...some contingencies in place. We're working on finding a way into this tower and bringing down You-Know-Who. From there, we can find a way to make this tower go away."

The Prime Minister rolled his eyes at the moniker again, muttering under his breath, "You-Know-Who..."

"What about afterwards?" Fudge asked.

"What do you mean afterwards?"

"Minister," Fudge started exasperatedly, "You can't possibly expect us to not do anything about the Muggles. We have to erase their memories about this tower."

"Erase their...erase their memories? Do you realize how many people have seen this tower? Do you realize that this is global!"

"We've done it before," Fudge smoothly answered.

"Before?"

"The Pyramids, that awful statue in Greece, the Colossus of Rhodes," Fudge listed them off his hand, "All magical things. We simply have to erase certain memories from people's minds and the Muggles will believe it to be just another wonder of the world."

The Prime Minister's eyes narrowed as Fudge continued to explain how they were going to erase select memories of all the people in England and the resulting, fabricated cover story.

"And this is just the norm for you people? Erase their memories and continue on with your lives?"

"It is not as easy as it sounds. Muggles and Wizards cannot live together. Think of the atrocities that could be committed. Think of how Muggles could take advantage of wizarding powers. No, we cannot allow it."

For once, Fudge looked almost threatening. He was adamant in his defense of the wizarding world from exposure. Though the Prime Minister still simmered with anger over such accusations, he could see the logic behind the other man's reasoning. A bit bigoted Fudge may be but never stupid.

"Fine. Do as you will. In the mean time, I'd like to have some eyes and ears with you folks."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to send one of my trusted soldiers. A Muggle soldier, if you will," the Prime Minister sarcastically intoned.

"I don't think that's the greatest idea," Fudge said haltingly.

"Doesn't matter. I need to know what's going on down there. I can only hear stories of how wizards sweep in against rebels and mince them into little pieces. I also hear stories of how Muggles are capturing wizards and witches and forcing them to do magic against

their own will or at gunpoint. I need to have a report so I can attempt to at least have a grasp of this situation," the Minister explained.

"There's complications if we send a Muggle soldier with our regular units. He won't be able to handle himself. Only wizards are meant to see some things. He won't be able to defend himself if a Death Eater attacks. I can't have my soldiers baby-sitting a Muggle," Fudge continued to construct an argument against this request.

"I won't be having any of it. I don't care if you treat him like a non-combatant, I need a report so I can have something to at least give to the Americans," the Prime Minister tiredly repeated.

"I'll allow it," Fudge finally answered after several moments of contemplation, "But I can't guarantee his safety. It is hard to differentiate regular Muggles from those who are serving You-Know-Who now. The lines between the two worlds are blurring so perhaps it would do you some good to know how we do things and understand why we do what we must do."

"Perhaps."

Sergeant Thorn didn't consider himself an extraordinarily unique individual.

He wasn't overly tall or diminutively short. He certainly wasn't the first one to approach an attractive bird at the pub when he was out with all of his friends. His upbringing lacked the abuse or eccentricities that usually produced an odd combination of unique and disturbed individuals. Thorn knew all of these qualities but also knew he was built for one thing in his life: to be a good soldier.

Thorn was a young man, only twenty, but knew his calling as soon as he held the end of a rifle. From that moment on, he swore to defend his country from any attacks or invasions and the what not. He was highly respected among his fellow soldiers and all of the upper ups in command looked well upon him. Taking all of that into consideration, it wasn't completely surprising to hear his name called into the Prime Minister's office.

"Sergeant Thorn. The Minister's ready to see you," the secretary told him.

"Thank you," Thorn replied in a deep baritone.

He strode purposefully into the office with the elegant yet rigid gait of a soldier. Saluting the Prime Minister and shaking his head, Thorn took a seat across from him, his back ramrod straight as he was taught.

"A bourbon?" the Prime Minister asked.

"No thank you."

"Suit yourself," the Prime Minister shrugged. Taking a gulp of the acerbic whiskey, the Minister eyed Thorn thoughtfully.

"How much do you know about the tower?" the Minister was straight to the point.

"Classified level above my clearance, sir. We're on strict patrols to monitor the rioting and other...unusual changes," Thorn delivered his canned response.

"How unusual?"

"Very unusual," Thorn hesitated, not knowing how much he could say.

The Prime Minister nodded as if he expected that sort of answer. He pulled out a manila folder from one of his cabinets and set it neatly on the desk. Even upside down, the text could be easily read by Thorn. It was his name.

"Sergeant Thorn of Wolverhampton. Highly recommended with a spotless record. No siblings, parents deceased, and no other job before joining the military. Are you the same Sergeant Thorn?" the Prime Minister read the dossier.

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant Thorn. What if I were to tell you there was a whole different world apart from the one you know. What if I told you there was a world so hidden from us that we can't find it though it's right in front of our eyes and in this world exists such a thing called magic," the Prime Minister regarded the soldier thoughtfully.

"I'd call you raving mad, sir," Sergeant Thorn replied without so much as blinking.

"As would I," he agreed, "As would I..."

"You didn't flinch when I told you of magic."

"Sir, I watched a tower rise from the ground in the middle of Hyde Park. Yesterday, I watched a man wave a stick at someone else and cause the other man to burst into flames. It's a good thing I'm not particularly religious or else I would've thought that the apocalypse was upon us...sir," Thorn finished with no waver or deformations in his voice.

"So you've seen it first hand then. Magic?"

"If you want to call it that."

"That's precisely what they call it."

"They, sir?" Thorn's curiosity was beginning to get the better of him.

"They," the Prime Minister rolled his eyes, "are called wizards. They're the ones responsible for this mess."

Thorn's jaw only tightened slightly, "I appreciate you having a laugh at my expense, sir, but is that all?"

"I didn't quite believe it my first time either," the Minister looked off into the distance, reminiscing on simpler times. Pulling out another sheet of parchment, he handed it to Thorn.

"What's this, sir?"

"Your assignment."

Thorn turned over the paper and frowned slightly as he read the text.

"Again, sir, is this a joke?"

"It's not," the Prime Minister seriously replied, "You are to be there tomorrow morning. Your commanding officer will fill you in. You are dismissed, Sergeant."

Thorn stood up in response to the Prime Minister's dismissal. Saluting him once and turning around, the Sergeant left the office with the paper clutched tightly in his hand. There was only one line of text on the paper. It read: Platform 9 and  $\frac{3}{4}$ .

The next morning, Sergeant Thorn and his Commanding Officer, a portly man by the name of Samson, were riding through the streets of London in an unmarked car. Samson didn't wish to attract attention from any stragglers or rebels. It was dangerous enough as it is to drive around the semi-deserted roads and roundabouts; driving around in a military vehicle would only attract trouble.

Samson explained that Sergeant Thorn was to explain all of his findings in extensive detail. He would be placed in a covert op and his mission was to understand the purpose of this tower and the man they called Voldemort. He would be assisted by an unnamed force along the way.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Thorn?"

"Permission to speak freely."

"Go ahead."

"Are we really believing this crock of magic bullshit?"

Samson didn't look up from a stack of documents he was reading. Adjusting his monocle so that he could read a particular passage, Samson responded without looking up.

"Thorn, we do as we're told."

"I understand, sir. Are you aware that our rendezvous is at Platform 9...and  $\frac{3}{4}$ ."

"Yes, Sergeant, I am."

Thorn took that answer as a sign to shut up. Samson wasn't one to question orders as he was a lifer. He had been in the military since he was eighteen and knew the ins and outs and the politics very well. If Samson wasn't questioning the orders, Thorn wouldn't question them either. As they drove, Thorn sworn he saw a flash of odd black robes. His grip tightened on the wheel as he navigated the corners. Finally, they arrived at the semi-abandoned railway. Off in the distance, a light or two would flicker, indicating that a resident or two stayed within their apartments.

Killing the engine, Thorn picked up his assault rifle with one hand and exited the car. Samson exited from the other side as they communicated with a series of hand signals and head jerks. They proceeded carefully, making sure to keep each other covered lest they run into a spot of trouble. As they arrived at Platform 9, Samson instructed Thorn to take cover and secure the perimeter. Once Thorn was satisfied, he reported back to Samson.

"Clear, sir."

"Good. Our contact should meet us here any minute now," Samson checked his watch as he kept his eyes peeled for anyone else.

"Who's our contact if you don't mind me asking, sir?"

"Fella goes by the name of Finnegan. Irish, I suppose with that surname."

"This Finnegan - who is he? SAS? American?"

"If only," Samson snorted.

Footsteps echoed against the stone floor. Judging from the reverberation and the volume, they were very close. Samson and Thorn pressed themselves against the wall, awaiting the unknown figure. Thorn gripped his gun tightly, anticipation making him sweat as the footsteps grew louder and louder. Another set of footsteps accompanied the previous ones. Then another. Thorn deduced there were at least three people making their way over to the platform.

Thorn held his breath in as the three people passed. There were teenagers, hardly over the age of sixteen. All were dressed in long,

black coats and wore dark colored beanies. Thorn could see a small handgun in the hand of the far right teenager. Lifting his rifle and pointing it at them, Thorn cleared his throat.

"Drop it."

The three teenagers froze as they heard the click of Thorn releasing the safety of his gun. One of them, without the gun, turned around slowly to face Thorn, his hands in the air all the while.

"You, on the right, drop it!" Samson yelled at him.

There was a clatter as the boy on the right dropped the handgun to the ground. The echo was intensified by the scarcity of noise in the large atrium. As all three teenagers turned, Thorn realized that they couldn't have been any older than eighteen at the most.

"What are you lads doing here? It's a bit unsafe to be running around with a gun," Samson grunted.

"It's not unsafe for us," sneered one of them.

"Just be getting back now," Thorn snapped at them.

"The Dark Lord will come for you," the one that had the gun pointed at Thorn.

"Oh great..." Thorn muttered.

"He can perform spells greater than you can ever see," the one in the middle said crazily, "We worship him."

Thorn could see the tell-tale tattoo that most of the hooligans wore. It was a skull with a snake wrapped around it on their wrist. For some reason or the other, all of those who believed the nutcase in the tower wore those tattoos.

"Just get going lads," Samson warned them, "You shouldn't be here."

"It's you that shouldn't be here old man," they spat.



Neither Thorn nor Sampson saw the teenagers' fourth compatriot. Thorn saw him a split second too late, swinging his gun around pointlessly. Thorn shut his eyes, awaiting the loud bang and subsequent death that would follow. But it never came.

"Protego!"

A shield erupted around Samson and Thorn as the bullet harmlessly bounced off. A man clad in green and beige robes materialized out of nowhere and brandished a stick at the rest of the teenagers.

"I know you know what this is," the man with the thick Irish accent threatened.

They backed off, eyeing the wooden stick warily. While they backpedaled and ran, they shouted, "The Dark Lord will come for you!"

"He tried! Failed! Next!" the Irish man yelled back.

Turning around to face them, the fellow with the weird wooden stick looked at them in an almost amused fashion.

"Careful now, wouldn't want to get done in by a wee bunch of folks," he joked.

"We weren't getting done in," Thorn grunted as he slung his rifle around his shoulder. The Irishman was obviously not a threat.

"Sure," he smiled sardonically.

Thorn assessed the man's appearance for the first time. He looked to be wearing a green and beige set of robes. It was an odd thing to wear but not as odd as the stick he was holding. It was carved and especially designed with a handle. It looked to be...a wand.

"You must be Finnegan," Samson grunted.

"Seamus Finnegan," the Irishman stuck his hand out as a greeting.

"You must be Thorn."

"No, I'm Samson. This is Thorn," Samson jerked his thumb.

"Nice to meet both of you," Seamus said congenially, "Let's not tarry any longer. Follow me."

Seamus turned around and walked through the barrier between Platform 9 and Platform 10. Thorn blinked. Then he blinked again. Did that man really go through the barrier? Even Samson looked a bit befuddled.

"Sir?" Thorn wondered aloud.

Samson took a deep breath and ran through the wall as well. Surprisingly, he didn't bounce off like a trolley. Instead, he passed through as if it were some invisible barrier. Thorn stood still, not quite believing what just happened. Was it a trick of the eye? Was it just an illusion? It couldn't have been just an illusion; Thorn passed by this particular wall a lot before all of these shenanigans started and no one had ever passed through the barrier. Shrugging, Thorn closed his eyes and walked through the wall. When he felt no pain, he hesitatingly opened one eye and found himself on another platform.

"Was wondering how long it'd take you," Seamus said with a wry grin.

"What..." Thorn looked around him to make sure it was all real, "...the fuck just happened."

His smile only grew wilder, "Magic."

They piled into a train. Thorn was disturbed to find other similarly dressed people in green and beige robes. As he took a seat in an empty compartment, Seamus started feeding him some crackpot story about wizards and wands and magic.

"You can't possibly serious! Samson, this is just a big hoax, isn't it?" Thorn yelled.

"Not exactly," Samson slowly spoke.

"What do you mean not exactly?"

"We should believe Finnegan here," Samson explained, "After all, he is the wizard."

Thorn was stunned to hear Samson agree with Seamus. Turning to the smiling Irishman, Thorn demanded another example.

"Show me again," he commanded.

Seamus shrugged and waved the stick in his hand. My gun suddenly levitated in the air. Feeling territorial, Thorn snatched it back but looked at it in awe. That was the third example of 'magic' Thorn had seen and he was sure that Seamus wasn't some sort of cheap conjurer.

"Excuse me if I'm a bit dazed," Thorn said in a surprised manner.

"You're actually taking it quite well. Most people faint," Seamus informed him.

"That's good to know."

Seamus laughed and was about to retort but was interrupted by the compartment door sliding open. A black man with dreadlocks stepped in and waved at the other two patrons before turning to Seamus.

"Archer's rendezvousing with us," the dreadlock man muttered to Seamus.

"Where?"

There was a loud thud on the roof. Seamus eyed it warily and pulled out his wand but lowered it when he looked out the window. Thorn turned to see what he was staring at and was immediately frightened by the sight of a man with a mask staring at him.

"Ahhhh!" Thorn yelled as he struggled to release the safety of his gun.

"Whoa, calm down there!" the dreadlock man insisted, "Our side."

"He," Thorn pointed at the upside down masked man, "is on your side! Bollocks that."

"He's a bit dramatic," Seamus relented, "But definitely on our side."

The masked man tapped the window with his wand and opened it. Swinging his legs inside, he dusted off his robes with a flourish and nodded slightly to Seamus. The man's mask was white all white with only little slits for the eyes and mouth. There were no other distinguishable features painted or stitched on the mask. It simply served to hide his face.

"A little dramatic, don't you think?" Seamus mused.

"Not particularly," the masked man's voice was garbled and certainly not his own. It was too deep and distorted to be a regular man's voice.

"You could have just waited until we got to Hogsmeade," dreadlocks offered.

"I caught up anyways," the masked man said in his garbled voice.

"Whatever suits your fancy, Archer," Seamus shrugged.

Without so much as an excuse me, Archer fled from the compartment, not bothering to say hello to the two astonished Muggles. Seamus and the dreadlocked man laughed as they saw the shocked faces of the two soldiers.

"That's Archer. He's one for the theatrics. Part of our unit," Seamus explained.

"What's wrong with his voice?" Samson asked.

"He never said. He just showed up one day with our Captain and his voice has always been like that. He never takes off his mask either."

"So he just wears a mask all the time and speaks in a disguised voice? Don't you think that's a tad bit suspicious?" Thorn interrogated.

"At first," dreadlocks admitted.

"I'm sorry, what's your name again?" Thorn asked.

"Oh - my apologies - I'm Dean. Part of the same unit," Dean shook Thorn's hand, "But as I was saying, at first he was a bit suspicious but some things happened and trust me, he's on our side."

"Right," Thorn said sardonically.

Seamus gave another chuckle and stood up, "Well I have to have a word with Archer about something. I'll leave you two here for a second. Come on, Dean."

As they left the compartment, Thorn rounded on Sampson.

"Sir, what is going on? Wizards? Wands? Magic?" Thorn asked his commanding officer without the influence of the supposed wizard.

Samson sighed, "I've only found out recently. The Minister only recently approved sending down sensitive information since the rise of the tower. It's apparent that this other world exists. This other world full of magic."

Samson said the word magic as if he still didn't believe it. Yet here they were traveling on a train after passing through a solid barrier and being defended by a man with a wooden stick. The facts were too prevalent.

"And the Minister wants me to sit-in with these people?" Thorn asked incredulously.

Samson grew serious, "It's imperative you learn how they do things. Day by day, the riots and anarchy are growing worst in the city. If they can't somehow stop this tower and the mad man inside of it, we'll have to resort to drastic measures."

"Drastic measures?"

"Drastic," Samson repeated.

Thorn was about to speak but was interrupted by the compartment door opening again. This time, a group of different robed people walked in.

"Oh," one of them said, "This must be the wrong compartment...wait, why are you carrying guns?"

Thorn felt a bit miffed when he realized that no one he had met was older than himself.

"We're...um...we're not wizards," Samson answered.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Well..."

Samson was saved by Dean re-entering the compartment.

"Oi, leave 'em alone. They're with me," said Dean.

"They're with you?" the bossy one asked.

"Yes, Ernie, they're with me," Dean rolled his eyes, "They're our Muggle tag along."

"Oh I remember 'bout that," Ernie slapped his forehead, "Tough unit you're heading with," Ernie addressed Thorn, "That's if the things they say about Potter are true."

"What things?" Thorn asked.

"I heard they leave no survivors."

"I heard Potter kills all the Death Eaters himself. No one else is allowed to."

"No, I heard Archer does all the dirty work. Potter just leaves it to him."

"Does it matter? No one's ever alive when they come through and they never take any prisoners back."

"I heard Potter once took on an entire group of mixed Death Eaters and then dumped them all in a ditch. Alive."

The chatter from the random wizards in the compartment grew to a deafening buzz as they continued to postulate and theorize. Thorn

deducted that this Potter fellow was certainly deranged. Dean was trying to shush them but was failing miserably. Samson stood up and whistled shrilly, calling for everyone's attention.

"There you go lad," Samson grunted at Dean as he took a seat again.

"So what is it, Dean? Is it true what they say about Potter? Your unit leaves no survivors," Ernie asked.

"I don't know," Dean shrugged honestly, "We're not allowed to use the Killing Curse. Once we've basically incapacitated the ones we haven't accidentally killed, we hand them over to Harry and Archer. We never take anyone back."

The whispers and rumors flew around the growing number of wizards. It seemed as if the legend of Potter was attracting a crowd. Dean, in the meanwhile, wasn't doing anything to dispel them.

"Is it true Archer once killed a man by sticking his wand through the eyes?"

"Did Potter really burn a house with Death Eaters stuck inside?"

"People say that it's Potter that You-Know-Who should fear and not Longbottom."

The questions were flying in quick and fast, growing in ridiculousness and believability. The crowd suddenly hushed though Thorn couldn't see why. After a moment, he heard the reason.

"Is there a problem here?" came the garbled voice of Archer.

"They're just a bit curious," Dean answered, a smile threatening to break on his face as the rest of the wizards stepped away from the advancing Archer.

"Curious about what?" Archer turned to Ernie.

"Well - um - you see -" Ernie was clearly uncomfortable, "-look we're here!"

The train indeed stopped on Ernie's mark, bringing an abrupt end to the sudden question and answer session. Ernie and his fellow wizards left, leaving Archer, Dean, and Seamus alone with Thorn and Samson.

"Alright, Samson. I'll have Dean bring you back, it's only Thorn from here," Seamus beckoned them to follow him outside.

"Right," Samson nodded, "Excuse me while I have a word?"

"Of course."

The rest of the wizards fled from the compartment, leaving Samson and Thorn to converse in private. Samson pulled the drapes for the window and the compartment door window, attempting to shroud them in secrecy. Samson started speaking in a hushed tone, obviously trying to hide whatever he was going to say.

"It's imperative you learn of how they operate. There are too many unsubstantiated reports on wizard violence going around. Things are tetchy as it is between these two worlds without overlapping conflict. Just stay quiet and come back alive and see if they have any way to stop this Voldemort fellow."

"Yes, sir," Thorn agreed with him.

Samson saluted him and fled the compartment without another word. Thorn followed him outside and stepped off the train, examining the destination for the first time. It seemed to be a small village lined with assorted shops and buildings. Thorn's eyes almost popped out of their sockets as he surveyed the vast assortment of shops. Moving pictures? Floating objects? Firewhiskey? He would have to make sure to try the last one.

"Over here!" waved Dean.

"We're all set," Samson informed him as they trotted up to the wizard.

"Good. Just take this powder, shout your destination and off you go," Dean handed Samson a small pinch of powder.



Samson looked at it hesitantly but shrugged and threw the powder into the fireplace. Shouting his destination loud and clear, Samson jumped into the green fire. Thorn watched in amazement as Samson suddenly disappeared.

"He'll be alright, right?" Thorn asked.

"We haven't let you down yet," Dean said cheekily, "Let's go meet Captain."

Thorn followed Dean as the wizard led him through the village of Hogsmeade. Little tents and camps were set up outside the shops. Wizards wearing the green and beige robes were constantly flowing in and out of said tents and other shops. Dean explained that green and beige robes were indicators that they were part of the Minister's Army, the equivalent wizard army. Hogsmeade was their temporary headquarters.

"What's that there? The castle in the distance?" Thorn pointed to the castle in the distance across the lake.

"That's Hogwarts. Used to be a school but it's mostly used as an Infirmary now. It also houses any of the refugees or displaced families. That's why we're down here," Dean explained.

Dean continued to introduce Thorn to the various aspects of wizarding culture. The Minister's Army was usually delegated to fighting off the various Death Eaters roaming underground and above ground as well. Voldemort's tower seemed to provide them a strange power that they couldn't quite understand. They were also having trouble fighting Muggles as they were not used to this sudden interweaving of worlds.

"We can deflect the bullets well enough but they break through our shields eventually. Then there's also some complications with what spells we can use against Muggles and how much exposure we can show. We try to stay away mostly," Dean led him through a labyrinth of tents and camps.

"So that...spell you used earlier. It can stop bullets but only for a little while?"

"Usually that's how it works."

Dean rounded one final corner and opened the flap to a larger tent. Thorn followed him inside and found a couple of people milling about. Some of them were playing some sort of card game that didn't make any sense and the others were busy as well. He spotted Seamus talking to another person with black hair and spectacles.

"Why is everyone so young?" Thorn asked as he once again found that he was the oldest.

"We start young, I guess," Dean shrugged.

"Oh good," Seamus spotted the approaching pair, "Harry, this is Thorn. Thorn, meet Captain Potter."

"Pleased to meet you," Potter stuck out his hand.

"You as well, Captain," Thorn nodded, giving Harry a once over.

He didn't seem particularly intimidating. He was of average height and a bit on the scrawny side to be honest. There were no special markings on him besides his vivid, green eyes. Was this really the deadly Captain Potter?

"Don't mean to be rude, but I'm a bit busy right now. Seamus round up everyone and find Archer. We're about to be sent out again," Potter nodded once to Thorn before burying his head in a file of documents.

"Out? In the field? I'll go," Thorn volunteered.

Potter looked surprise by Thorn's sudden volunteered participation. His eyes narrowed and Thorn felt a peculiar feeling pass through his head. It was only for a moment, however, and Potter nodded.

"Alright, stick with Dean."

The rest of the people in the tent gathered round the Captain. Thorn looked around and realized that even though Potter seemed to be a scrawny, little kid, he commanded the respect of everyone in the tent. Thorn would have to keep an eye out for Potter's supposed ferociousness.

"Everyone pay attention. This is Thorn. He's a Muggle and none of you are to give him any stick," Potter looked threateningly at his unit, "If I even hear wind of anything like that, I'll send you out to Moody myself."

Once that particular message was delivered, "Now, someone's reporting a disturbance out in the Midlands. Moody thinks there's a couple of Mixers and possibly Trolls and he's sent us out. We're flying out in five minutes."

Potter was direct and to the point. Once he was finished, he left the rest of his unit to gather their supplies and prepare for flight. Thorn turned to Dean with a question in his mind.

"What are Mixers?"

"Mixers are...well they're Muggles that follow Voldemort," Dean tried to explain.

"What's the difference between a Mixer and a Death Eater?"

"Death Eaters are just wizards who follow Voldemort. We call the Muggle folk Mixers because they don't know any better."

"Don't know any better?" Thorn asked with a frown.

Dean shrugged, "Voldemort's been around for a long time, mate. He's raised that tower though and all of a sudden Muggles are following and worshipping him. They just don't know any better."

"I suppose," Thorn did feel a bit angered that Dean kept referring to them as Muggles. It wasn't as if they were a different race or anything. But Thorn kept those thoughts to himself for now.

"So we're flying? I didn't know that you would use planes."

Dean scoffed, "Planes? Mate, we're riding broomsticks."

"You're kidding..."

"Don't you want to find out?" Dean grinned.

"This is amazing!" Thorn yelled as he held on to Dean.

They were currently flying hundreds of feet above the ground on a broomstick. Thorn whooped and hollered, much to the rest of the unit's amusement when they took flight. Thorn marveled at the view and the feeling of flying with no restraints.

"If I had one of these, I'd go flying everywhere!" Thorn yelled into Dean's ear.

"I would too, but it's a bit dangerous. Muggles easily spot you if you're not careful and you can't go around flying at high altitudes because of all the airplanes. But since the tower is up, we've done a bit more flying since we're not nearly as conspicuous," Dean explained.

A wizard saddled along side Dean and grinned at them, "Having fun there, Thorn? I'm Michael Corner, resident humanitarian."

"Michael likes to make sure everyone's getting along. Good for morale he says," Dean piped in.

"Everyone but Archer. He doesn't get along with anyone," Michael smiled or at least tried to smile in the freezing wind.

"What's his problem?" Thorn wondered.

"He wears a mask. That should tell you enough about him," Michael said wryly as he peeled away.

"Who else is in the unit?" Thorn asked Dean.

"There's Harry. He's kind of been leading us ever since Hogwarts - well, school. There's Archer; it's better not to talk to him. You've met Seamus and Michael. Padma's over there, she takes care of all the defenses and precautionary things."

"She?"

"Yeah," Dean answered bemusedly, "Why?"

"You let girls fight?"

Dean shrugged, "If they're good enough, yeah. Don't see anything wrong with it."

"Interesting."

"Anyways, the other girl is Su Li. She's a wee one but don't let that fool you. Anytime we need to blow up something, we ring Su Li."

Dean finished the introductions of the unit. Leading the flight, Potter made a hand signal to the rest of them. Dean turned around and yelled, "Hold on tight!"

"What - why - ohhhh!"

Dean pitched the broom into a steep dive and Thorn held on for dear life as the rest of the unit followed. The rush of wind whistled in Thorn's ears and the man smiled gleefully at the exhilarating feeling. He was reminded of the new rollercoaster in Staffordshire except the experience was increased a hundred-fold. They touched down on the ground only a few seconds later.

"Have to do that again," Thorn grinned.

Su Li touched down a second later, her legs slightly wobbly.

"Do we always have to fly?" Su Li grumbled.

"Didn't want anyone splinching themselves in case they have Anti-Apparition wards," Potter replied smoothly.

"Fan out. Seamus and Dean, you take Thorn down the left. Archer with me. Su Li, Padma, and Michael take the right. We'll meet on the other side of the town," Potter ordered.

"Come on, Thorn. Let's take a stroll," said Seamus.

The town in question was located somewhere in the West Midlands. It looked to be abandoned, much like many of the towns in England since the rise of the tower. Most families fled to their homes or other safe structures to shield themselves from the riots and well...Mixers for lack of a better word. There were three main alleys that split on one end of town and re-joined in the other. Thorn followed Seamus and Dean down the left alley.

"So what do you do when you get here? Doesn't seem like there's anything going on," Thorn commented.

"They like to hide for a bit until we make our presence known. We usually oblivate the Mixers and send them on their merry way. Usually, we have to take down the bigger creatures," answered Dean.

"Creatures?" Thorn asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, you know. Dragons, Trolls, Centaurs and what not," Seamus winked at the befuddled Muggle.

"Right," Thorn warily released the safety of his assault rifle and brought it into a ready position.

"Just don't go pointing that thing at me. I got hit in the leg the other week and it bloody hurt more than any curse I've ever felt," Seamus warned.

"If you got hit in the leg, how come you're walking a week later?"

"Magic," Seamus shrugged.

Thorn realized that he had a lot to learn about this magic business. He brought his rifle up to his shoulder and started making routine scans for any targets. If there were rebels out here, and Thorn had dealt with his fair share, he would need to be prepared. They had only walked for about a minute or so before they heard an explosion on the other side of town.

"Don't worry," Seamus assuaged Thorn's worries, "They can handle themselves. If they need help, they'll send up sparks. Let's just clear our area and move over there when we can."

They hurried their pace in case the others needed help. Seamus and Dean were only haphazardly checking the various stores and nooks. Thorn was half jogging along as silence once again fell over the town. The only sound was the heavy padding of his combat boots and the heavy heaves of his lungs.

"Contact left!" Seamus yelled as he produced a magical shield.

"Thorn, behind me!" Dean yelled as he dove to the ground and pulled Thorn with him.

Thorn heard the distinct sound of bullets grazing and chipping the stone walls behind him. Seamus took cover behind a thick wall and started aiming spells towards the attacker. The attacker was hiding in a window about two buildings on the left. He would only peek out and shoot his gun for a couple of seconds before retreating. Thorn kept his ears perked as he glanced over the low wall he was hiding behind.

"Dean. It's a semi-automatic. He's going to have to reload after a couple of shots. Can you do something about that when he goes to reload?" Thorn breathed out, the adrenaline rushing through his veins.

"You bet I can," Dean muttered.

Thorn's prediction came true as the attacker suddenly stopped his barrage of fire after a set number of shots. Thorn nodded to Dean, indicating that it was time. Dean stood over the low wall and aimed purposefully.

"Bombarda!"

The window exploded, a crater sized hole replacing the spot instead. Thorn could distinctly spot a body flying and crunching against the ground. They had no time to celebrate their small victory as more gunfire rained down on them.

"Got three to the right. Three!" Dean hopped over the low wall to take a more forward position against a pillar.

"One down!" Seamus yelled as he obviously hit someone with some sort of spell.

"They're moving. Trying to flank you, Seamus!" Thorn yelled as he spotted the two attackers on the ground. He aimed carefully and let out a small squeeze of gunfire. It splattered against the wall behind the attackers but forced them to take cover.

"Thorn," Dean was in front of Thorn, taking cover behind a large pillar, "Can you see them?"

"Yeah. They're over your right shoulder hiding behind the two parked cars."

Dean nodded and then squeezed his eyes shut in concentration.

"Accio Guns!"

Two rifles whistled through the air and crashed in front of Dean's feet, rendering the attackers almost useless.

"Neat trick," Thorn said.

"Thanks."

It was Thorn who spotted the object flying through the air.

"Grenade!"

Thorn leaped over the wall and tackled Dean away from the grenade. The resulting explosion was deafening as the fragments ripped against the surrounding area. Thankfully, Thorn had knocked them both behind some sort of cover. As Thorn peeked over the wall, he could see that the resulting explosion had obliterated the pillar where Dean had previously stood.

"Good show, Thorn. You're looking to be more useful than me," Dean grunted as he got up.

Seamus had stunned the two attackers and bound them on the ground. In the distance, they could hear more fighting going on in the background. Seamus and Dean looked at each other in worry as a loud, animalistic noise sounded through the town.

"Troll," they said simultaneously.

"Hurry, Thorn!"

They sprinted and cut through an alley into the center part of the town. They emerged in a large clearing that was probably the central hub of the previously quiet town. Thorn's jaw dropped as he looked



up and found a massive troll swinging it's club around. In the center of the area was a fountain and Archer looked to be dodging the troll by running around the fountain.

"That's a...." Thorn trailed off as he continued to gawk at the massive creature.

"Troll," Seamus finished as he leapt into action.

The troll was smashing it's club against the ground, ripping up chunks of pavement and dirt in the process. Archer was hopping around it nimbly, unscathed by the pounding of the club but unable to get a good hit in. The troll roared as Seamus hit him with a spell between the eyes. It swung around dumbly, blind and confused. Thorn narrowly ducked below the club, as he hopped around gingerly. He aimed his gun at the troll's head and squeezed off a few rounds. To his great surprise, most of the bullets seemed to deflect off the troll's skin. However, it certainly seemed to agitate the large creature as it gave an almighty roar and turned towards Thorn.

Thorn dropped to one knee and took very careful aim. His finger was steady as it squeezed off three rounds directly at the intended target. The troll groaned as three bullets made direct connection with his right eye. It clutched the eye and dropped the club, swaying dangerously all the while. The wizards seemed to be frozen by the troll's sudden dizziness. After a few seconds, the troll unceremoniously dropped at Thorn's feet. Thorn gave it a kick and realized that it wasn't breathing.

"Way to go, Thorn!" Seamus whooped as he ran towards their Muggle tag along.

Archer approached them as Seamus and Dean continued to congratulate Thorn. His mask looked down at the troll then at Thorn then back at the troll again. He didn't say anything but Archer gave Thorn a thumbs up and walked away.

"Impressive," Dean mused.

"What is?" Thorn asked.

"Archer never gives anyone a thumbs up," Seamus laughed as he clapped Thorn on the back.

A minute later, Potter emerged from a different alley looking unbothered.

"All clear?" Potter asked.

Archer nodded in response as he gathered a few of the bound prisoners. The rest of the unit also rejoined the group at the main courtyard, prisoners in tow. Potter counted the prisoners and nodded to himself.

"Sort them."

Archer started moving some of the prisoners on the left and the rest of them on the right. Thorn checked his ammo and leaned over to ask Seamus a question.

"What's he doing?"

"We're sorting the Mixers from the Death Eaters," Seamus said as he watched Archer complete the task.

"Why?"

"We're going to obliviate the Mixers."

"And the rest?"

"That's up to Harry and Archer to decide," Seamus left the answer purposefully ambiguous.

"I see."

Archer approached Seamus and spoke in his usual garbled distortion, "Obliviate the Mixers."

"We know," Seamus rolled his eyes as he levitated the Mixers so they were all in one collective group.

In the meanwhile, Archer and Potter were taking the rest of the Death Eaters to a different, out of sight location. Thorn was curious as he watched them disappear around the corner.

"Why do they lead them away? Have you ever seen what they do?" Thorn asked again.

"No and I don't particularly care to find out either," Seamus admitted.

Seamus began to obliviate the Mixers, which looked to be a relatively simple task to Thorn. He just said a spell and then told the captor what they were supposed to remember. There was a fleeting thought in Thorn's mind as he imagined the possibilities of such an ability in the hands of the wrong people. But those were problems he wasn't supposed to dwell on. There was something else he could find out though...

While the rest of the unit was busy taking care of the Mixers, Thorn slinked off unnoticed. He followed the path that Potter and Archer had taken. Thorn slowed down as he heard the distinct distortion of Archer.

"Do you know where he is?" Archer asked.

The Death Eater spat in his face, which didn't amount to much since Archer was wearing his mask. He was the last Death Eater as apparently Archer was finished questioning them. All of the Death Eaters were kneeling in a single row in front of Potter and Archer. Each of them were unmasked, an irony that was not lost upon Archer.

"Nothing then?" Potter's arms were crossed as he glared at the Death Eaters.

"Nothing," repeated Archer.

"Alright," Potter sighed, "On with it then."

Archer nodded as Potter took a step back from the proceedings.

"Silencio."

Archer waved his wand around the Death Eaters once. He then moved each Death Eater so they were all kneeling in a make shift crater that had been created during the fight. Archer took a couple of steps back and pointed his wand at the collected group of Death Eaters.

"Expulso!"

Before Thorn could even blink, the crater exploded but there were no sounds. It was just an explosion of debris and dust clouding the crater. As the dust started to fall and settle, Thorn was horrified to see bits and pieces of human flesh inside the crater. Blood was pooling inside the large ditch as Archer leaned in to make sure he completed the job.

"Alright," Potter's face was grim but determined, "Let's get a move on."

It was raining.

It always rained nowadays. The clouds constantly obscured the soft warmth of the sun. The land was covered by dull palettes of grey and more grey. If it wasn't rain, it was always something. Ron couldn't remember the last time he saw the sun.

Ron turned around, stepping inside the tent to seek shelter from the steady drum of the rain. Inside, Neville and Hermione were huddled over a small fire, eager to steal its warmth in an effort to dry themselves from the soaking rain.

"You two shouldn't have gone running through the woods," Ron clucked.

"What were we supposed to do?" Neville said through chattering teeth, "There were Mixers after us."

"Maybe you shouldn't have been wandering through the woods in the first place?" Ron shot back.

"Give me a break," Neville grumbled, "Just needed some fresh air."

Ron almost reminded him that fresh air was a severely lacking commodity nowadays. Instead, he bit his tongue and stopped the retort. Tensions were high enough as it is and for once, Ron didn't look to add any more tension for the sake of winning the argument.

"I'm okay, by the way," Hermione miserably chipped in.

"At least you brought him back," Ron admitted.

Hermione was silent as she rubbed her hands back and forth to create some friction and generate a bit of heat. It wasn't a particularly cold month. Winter had not quite set in yet, but the rain and lack of sun didn't do much to raise the temperature. Ron was still holding out for a slight break in the sky and a bit of reassurance that the sun didn't just vanish.

"So what next?" Ron interrupted the small silence.

Neville touched the locket hanging on his neck. Finding the locket had been easy enough. Before Dumbledore died, Neville went with

the former Headmaster to a cave where Voldemort apparently hid one of his Horcruxes. Though the journey almost claimed Dumbledore's life, they had successfully retrieved the Horcrux. It was Dumbledore's last act of help before he died. Unfortunately for the trio, they still didn't have a way to destroy the Horcrux.

"We need to find Hufflepuff's cup," Hermione concluded.

"I thought that's what we were doing the whole time," Ron complained.

"It's not as easy as wandering through the woods and stumbling upon a Hufflepuff heirloom," Hermione glared at Ron, "We thought that maybe the Smith family would have it but they don't. After that incident with the Mixers, we've been forced to stay on the run since apparently Voldemort is still after Neville."

Hermione intoned the last part with more than enough sarcasm. Honestly, it was a bit unnecessary on her part. But even she wasn't immune to the cabin fever and paranoia of being on the run. Ron rubbed his forehead in frustration as he sought to find a way to locate the cup.

"There has to be some other way. Where would Voldemort put it? He likes trophies so he's not just going to leave it anywhere. Would he give it to someone he trusts?" Ron wondered out loud.

Hermione looked surprised at the veracity of Ron's theory, "I suppose that makes a bit of sense. But who would Voldemort trust?"

"Bellatrix," Neville growled, "And Bates. Those are the only two."

Neville was angry at the mention of both Bellatrix and Bates. Ron worried for him. Neville wore the locket more than either Ron or Hermione. Ron certainly felt the pressure and heaviness of the locket when he was wearing the damned thing, but Neville insisted on wearing it most of the time. It couldn't possibly be healthy for him.

"There's no way of finding them though," Ron reasoned.

"We'll just have to keep looking," Hermione tiredly sat back on her haunches, leaning away from the fire.

Ron looked hesitantly at Neville, "What if we..."

"No!" Hermione yelled, glaring at Ron angrily, "We can't do that."

"Just a suggestion," Ron raised his hands placidly.

"It's a dumb suggestion. Neville needs to keep that connection closed. Do you remember what happened last time?" Hermione looked at Ron pointedly.

"Fair point."

"What's the point?" Neville shuffled his feet against the dirt, his expression desolate, "I can stop Voldemort from retrieving any physical memories, but I still feel his mood swings and that. Every now and then, I can just feel his hatred."

"You just have to keep trying the Occlumency," Hermione rubbed Neville's arm soothingly.

"Hopefully."

Ron took a seat and rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he ran different scenarios in his head. They needed some way to find Bellatrix. That in itself was already a tough task, but what were they to do once they found the crazed witch? Interrogate her? They had no veritaserum and they certainly couldn't Crucio it out of her. Unless...Bellatrix kept the cup with her at all times. It wasn't completely implausible. If Voldemort gave Bellatrix such an important object, it would stand to reason that she either wouldn't let it out of her sight or keep it in a highly protected area. They just needed a way...

"What if we capture one of the Mixers?" Ron suddenly voiced his thoughts.

"After we capture one, then what? Even if we find out where Bellatrix is, there's no way to wrangle the information out of her," Hermione was on the same wavelength as Ron but for once, Ron was one step ahead.

"Second year," Ron smiled.

"Second year?" Neville asked.

"Polyjuice! We find a Mixer or a Death Eater, get them to say the location and then polyjuice them. We can check and see if the cup is there without getting in any trouble," Ron grinned as he finished his plan.

Hermione frowned then frowned even deeper as she looked at Ron, "You might actually be right."

"Don't look too happy," Ron said smugly.

"It'll still take a month for the Polyjuice to brew but after that..." Hermione nodded as she saw the merits of the plan.

"One month. What could possibly happen?" Ron rhetorically asked.

It was best not to wonder what would happen could possibly happen in one month.

The trio spent the better part of the month stealing the proper ingredients from various wizarding locales. Surprisingly enough, stealing the ingredients wasn't the hard part of the mission. Avoiding the Mixers and the sudden escalation of the war proved to be the tougher task. All around them, Mixers, Death Eaters, and other creatures were popping through Muggle towns and attacking their various residents. Hermione, Neville, and Ron were constantly on the move to avoid patrols and other random attacks. Voldemort was still searching for Neville.

More than once, Neville complained about feeling Voldemort's anger or occasionally his glee. All the while, the locket still swung around his neck, a mocking symbol of their inability to destroy the Horcrux. They knew of no way to destroy it. Dumbledore didn't leave them with any specific instructions for the destruction of the dark objects. Hermione theorized various ways to obliterate the object, but it was to no avail. No amount of Redcutors or curses even dented the locket.

"Is there anything else we need?" Ron asked as he surveyed the makeshift potions lab. If they could make Polyjuice potion in the stall of a bathroom, they could certainly make one while running away from various attackers and bounty hunters.



"No, we have everything. It'll take -" Hermione crossed off a day on her calendar, "- three more days to finish brewing."

"Guess we need to just do the other part then," Ron admitted with a sigh.

Currently, the trio were somewhere south of the greater Manchester area. After successfully evading a Death Eater infested area, they settled in an empty clearing. They were careful to place the proper wards around their camp area to make it difficult for anyone to find them. Unfortunately, they needed to wander back to a strong Death Eater area in order to capture one of them.

"What do you think?" Ron asked, "Back south?"

"I suppose. There were about three or four camps we walked by that were full of Mixers. We need to find one that will know where Bellatrix is. He or she has to be a relatively high ranking member," Hermione concluded.

"That should make it easier," Ron sardonically moaned.

"Quite," Hermione sighed as she stirred the concoction.

"Hullo," Neville tiredly rubbed his eyes as he entered the main living area of the tent. The tent was separated into one living area that had a small table for eating and three other separate rooms for each member.

Neville plopped down, still tired from his shift as lookout, "How's the potion coming along?"

"Three days," Hermione promptly answered, "We just need to find someone to impersonate."

"Got it," Neville absent-mindedly rubbed the chain around his neck.

Hermione looked at him in worry and gently said, "You want me to take a turn with it?"

"Nope," Neville abruptly stood, sending his chair sliding backwards with a screech, "Let's head on out."

He left the room quickly, leaving Hermione and Ron mystified at his rather abrupt exit. Hermione turned to Ron, her face scrunched in exasperating stress, "Does he seem okay to you?"

Ron shrugged, "It's hard to be okay with some evil psycho ordering everyone to try and kill you. I reckon we should give him break."

"No, you imbecile, I mean the locket," Hermione snapped.

"I knew that," Ron furiously defended, "I offered to wear the damn thing, but Neville wouldn't have any of it."

"You should have tried harder," Hermione insisted.

"I'm trying as hard as I bloody can, but he won't let go of it," Ron hissed through his teeth, trying to keep his voice down so Neville couldn't hear their argument.

"Dammit," Hermione cursed as she ran a hand through her bushy hair, "He can't keep wearing it. The negative effects of the locket will wear him down just like the diary wore down Ginny."

"You don't think I know that?" Ron angered at the mention of his sister.

"I know you know that," Hermione replied testily.

"Is everything alright?" Neville re-entered the room, slinging on a jacket and looking at them curiously.

"Everything's fine," Hermione smoothly replied.

"Okay," Neville still eyed them warily, "We should get moving. I remember a Death Eater camp somewhere in the Midlands that was pretty big. Bellatrix will probably be there."

"That's fine. Just let me pack up for a second," Hermione turned around and glared at Ron so Neville couldn't see. Ron barely suppressed an eye roll.

"Get it from him," Hermione hissed at Ron as she passed him to get to her room. Ron sighed, not relishing the task that was beset upon him.

The trio packed up their camp and proceeded south to the Midlands. It was inevitable that they would have to venture into the large Death Eater camp they passed. They didn't see any Mixers to the North where the Tower had less influence. The strong congregation of Death Eaters and Mixers were mostly located in Southern England. Hermione theorized that the Tower must have a strong compulsion charm that attracts the attention and adoration of regular non-magic folk.

They usually traveled at night, but they were in a rush since capturing a Death Eater was maximum priority. If they couldn't capture one before the three days ended, the potion would be ruined and they would need to start all over again. They couldn't afford such a setback since every second wasted strengthened Voldemort's power. So they trudged through the daylight, careful to avoid the main roads or any suspicious movements. Not even regular Muggles could be trusted. Voldemort had made them aware of Neville's presence. They walked along an empty dirt road, keeping quiet as they didn't want to attract any unnecessary attention. One could never know whether or not there was someone listening to a relatively light conversation. Any sense of Neville's presence would alert Voldemort.

"We're almost there," Hermione said as she consulted her map, "If I marked this correctly, the Death Eater camp should be in a clearing a few kilometers ahead."

"Good," Neville rubbed the chain again.

Hermione shot Ron a look behind Neville's back at Neville's movement. Ron threw her a frustrated look, indicating with a few hand motions that he was trying. Hermione mimicked back that he should try harder. Ron simply threw his hands up in the air with an exasperated groan.

"You alright, Ron?" Neville turned around and looked at his friend.

"All fine, just so chipper to waltz into a Death Eater camp."

"No need to be so sarcastic," Neville frowned as he turned his head back around and picked up the pace.

Hermione sent Ron a look as if to say, "Look what you did."

Ron shook his head and stomped his way forward so he walking side to side with Neville, "Sorry about that. You know how tetchy I can get when we're about to do something a bit dangerous."

Neville smiled wistfully, "Yeah, usually we're just sneaking around the castle. Simpler times, eh?"

"If only."

They were approaching an incline that Ron recognized. He signaled for the other two to stay low as they crouched along the path, hoping to disguise themselves from any lookouts. As they reached the top of the crest, they peered over and discovered the camp.

Rows and rows of tents were pitched in the basin-like area. Angry yells and screams could be heard from where they were perched and Ron could distinctly make out a dragon chained to the ground on the other side of the camp. He gulped as he inspected the other dangers. A strong combination of Death Eaters and Mixers milled about. However, it was quite obvious that the Death Eaters and Mixers were in segregated camps. Ron could tell where the wizards started and ended as their camp wore their distinctly recognizable robes. The Mixers, on the other hand, were dressed in more Muggle affair, wearing long, black coats with dark head coverings.

"That's a lot of people," Ron whispered.

"Guess we have a lot of targets then," Hermione said breathlessly as her eyes constantly flittered about, taking in the vast amount of information provided by the Death Eater camp.

"You see that?" Neville shifted over on his belly and pointed to a row of people walking in the distance, "That must be where they leave and enter the camp."

Indeed, the camp was surrounded by a fence and only had one gate. It didn't quite matter for the wizards as they could take flight whenever they wanted, so they assumed that it was their for the

Mixers protection. Neville once again pointed out a row of people walking along the front gate and leaving the compound.

"We'll have to snatch one of them while they're leaving on a patrol," Hermione brought out her pair of Omnioculars.

As she scanned the compound, she suddenly stopped and clicked a few dials on the Omniocular. She wordlessly handed it to Neville. Neville picked it up with an air of curiosity and held it up to his eyes. Ron watched as his face turned stony with anger. Neville handed the Omniocular to Ron without saying anything, leaving Ron curious as to what they both saw. Raising the device to his eyes, Ron immediately knew why they were furious.

Bellatrix was in the camp.

"Well...at least we won't have to go very far," Ron said as he handed it back to Hermione.

They waited a day to study the rotation. People were constantly filing in and out of the compound, but Hermione finally found a pattern to their patrol. Somehow, the Mixers were stuck doing the routine patrols around the compound. Three groups of four usually circled around the area, but they were clearly not paying attention to much. It was apparent that they didn't think anyone would actually dare attack them. All they would have to do is isolate one of the patrols around the back of the compound, stun and befuddle all but one of them, and take the remaining patrol in their custody.

Night fell as the trio moved from their camp a few kilometers away from the Death Eater compound. They took positions along the path the patrol usually followed and bided their time, knowing that the Mixers would arrive eventually. On cue, a group of four Mixers emerged around the bend, their guns slung around their shoulders.

Ron, Neville, and Hermione were disillusioned and almost imperceptible to the human eye in the dark. Since Neville was quickest on the trigger, he would have to be the one to figure two Stunners since the Mixers outnumbered them. Ron was crouched behind a tree as he took careful aim at the leftmost Mixer.

"Have you heard?" one of the Mixers said loudly, "Potter's group took out another patrol just a day ago."

Ron froze at the mention of his friend. He had almost forgotten about Harry as the boy had left for the army so long ago. Caught up in the hunt for the Horcruxes, Ron barely spared him a thought and was surprised to see his name mentioned by the Mixers.

"No survivors again," one of the other Mixers chuckled darkly, "Hopefully I don't run into the bugger."

The Mixers were almost in the exact area needed to hide them from any watching eyes. It would only take them a couple more seconds to walk into their trap.

"Patrol had a troll with them too. Looks like they're going to have to throw more at Potter if they really want to take him down."

"Stupefy!"

Three voices yelled and four spells were incanted at the same time as they successfully orchestrated the takedown. Hermione and Neville immediately took off their Disillusionment charm as they raced to the fallen four.

"This one," Neville grunted as he pulled one of the Mixers off to the side.

Hermione was busy casting memory and befuddlement charms on the other stunned Mixers. It would do them no good to have Bellatrix discover that one of the Mixers were kidnapped while on patrol. Hermione was simply going to implant a memory that one of the Mixers wandered off in anger after a harsh argument.

"Wait," Hermione gasped as they were about to leave.

She shuffled over to the man that Neville picked to polyjuice. Ripping off his beanie, she groaned as she discovered that he was bald.

"Another one, we need one of the others," Hermione desperately cast the memory charms on the bald Mixer.

"Shit," Ron muttered as he pulled off the beanie of another patrol. Thankfully, he had a full mane of hair.

"We need to go," Neville said as he spied another patrol walking in their direction, just a couple of minutes out of the way.

Ron levitated the other Mixer out of the path of the woods as Hermione and Neville revived the rest of the patrol.

"Now listen," Hermione told them in their befuddled state, "Your friend wandered off into the woods after you argued about uniform policies. Me and my friends were never here."

The three men nodded dumbly as Hermione continued to flesh out the implanted story.

"Hermione, leave," Neville pulled her arm as he spotted the other patrol coming closer.

They scampered back into the woods just before the next patrol arrived to find three confused men.

"Tell me again why we didn't just take one little piece of his hair?" Ron asked as they stared at their unconscious prisoner.

"We need to know if he knows anything about Bellatrix and the Horcrux," Neville stared at the prisoner with a hard look on his face.

"Let's just get this over with," Hermione shivered, "We need to do this before the potion goes bad."

Neville nodded and cast the appropriate spell to wake the Muggle. The man's eyes snapped open and blinked as he adjusted to the dim light of the room. He struggled momentarily to move but found himself bounded by several lines of rope. Twisting his head so he could see his kidnappers, the man found three teenagers looking at him intensely.

"Who the fuck are you?" he spat.

Neville immediately hit him with a Stinging hex.

"Ow! What the bloody..." the man trailed off in several curses as he reacted to the pain, "The Dark Lord will -"

Neville cast a silencing charm on him. The man continued to talk though no sounds were actually escaping from his vocal chords. It took him a couple seconds to realize his dumbness. Once he realized his disability, he tried insisting through various facial expressions. When it became apparent that Neville was completely willing to let the man stay silent his whole life, the man started to plead with his eyes.

Reversing the silencing charm, Neville spoke and cut off the man, "Let's try this again. If you answer all our questions, we'll let you go. Scot-free."

The man seemed to consider his options as he inspected the three teenagers. The girl was a bit squeamish so far, but the other two didn't seem to care if he died right there. Not one to take chances, the man nodded his agreement.

"Good," Neville bent his knees so he was at face level with the man, "What's your name?"

"Stephen," he answered hesitantly.

"Okay, Stephen. Obviously you know that we're wizards. Except we're the type of wizards that want to defeat Voldemort."

Stephen scoffed, "Of course I know who you are. You're Longbottom. Funny last name you have there."

"Thanks," Neville said dryly, "What can you tell me about Bellatrix LeStrange?"

"That crazy bitch? Why would I tell you anything about her? She'd kill me."

Neville sighed and raised his wand. The man suddenly yelled, "Wait! No! Don't do anything! Just - okay, I'll tell you."

His wand still raised, Neville looked at Stephen expectantly.

"What do you want to know?" Stephen eyed the wand with trepidation.



"Does she keep something with her the whole time? A little trinket? Or maybe she keeps something in the compound under guard?" Neville questioned him.

Stephen hesitated and Ron caught the nervous expression in his face. He knew something.

"Neville, why don't you just use the Cruciatus on him? We don't have time to waste," Ron was counting on the fact that Stephen knew the particular curse.

"NO!" Stephen yelled, his eyes widening at the very name, "She keeps something. It's guarded."

"Where?" Neville pressed.

Stephen visibly gulped, "It's guarded by the dragon."

"Oh," Hermione squeaked, clearly not expecting that answer.

"The dragon that's here? That dragon that's in the compound?"

Stephen nodded, "It's guarded at all times by the damned thing. I don't know exactly what it is, but it's kept in a safe with the dragon's eggs."

"Great," Ron muttered as he walked out of the room.

Neville and Hermione followed suit, presumably incapacitating Stephen. They found Ron pacing the table with his face in his hands.

"A dragon? We're supposed to get the Horcrux from a dragon?" Ron exclaimed.

"Fleur and Krum did it during the tournament. Why can't we?" Neville shrugged.

"Fleur and Krum didn't have to do it in a camp full of Death Eaters!" Ron countered.

"Well if you have any other ideas, feel free to chime on in!" Neville yelled back.

"This is bloody ridiculous," Ron said under his breathe.

"We can do this," Hermione insisted, "We just need a plan."

"Only one of us can go in there. We can't go and capture more patrols without raising suspicion. So one of us is going to in there, fool the rest of the Death Eater camp, fight the dragon to get the Horcrux, and then eventually escape without anyone noticing," Ron listed off the increasingly difficult tasks.

"No one said you had to come along," Neville's hands turned into fists as he growled at Ron.

"And yet I'm here."

Neville kicked at the ground in frustration and brought his hand up to touch the chain of the locket. Ron saw the slight movement and snorted.

"Can you please take off the damn thing for a little while? It's not like it's going to grow legs and walk about somewhere."

Neville stiffened at the implicit mention of the locket. He kept his hand on the chain as he turned to face his best friend, "Why? You want to wear it, don't you?"

"I don't want to wear it, but I thought we agreed to take turns with it. That way one of us won't get stuck with it," Ron pointedly looked at Neville.

"I'm fine with it."

"Obviously not. You're moody and temperamental and it's hasn't gotten any better when you wear the stupid locket."

"This isn't some sort of inferiority complex again, is it?" Neville sneered, "Do you want to wear it because you're afraid I'll take all the credit for it?"

Ron didn't hesitate a second to punch Neville in the face. Neville wheeled to the ground, clutching his face in shock. Ron stood over him, heaving angry breathes as he glared at his friend. He was angry that Neville would insinuate such things. He was angry that

Neville seemed to take him for granted. Ron turned to Hermione, his anger directed at her as well. Not once did she try to stop Neville's tirade or veer off their argument. Ron turned on his heel and wordlessly exited the tent.

He stormed outside, walking the opposite direction of the Death Eater camp. He just needed some space, some fresh air as it were. Ron shook his head as he angrily stomped on stray branches and leaves.

"Stupid, smarmy bastard," Ron said as he continued to stomp around immaturely.

Satisfied that he had effectively crunched every stray twig in a six foot radius, Ron took a seat against a tree trunk, blowing the hair in front of his eyes. Truthfully, Ron never felt that he belonged in this quest. He wasn't as brave as Neville or as smart as Hermione. Frankly, there were only two things he excelled in: Quidditch and chess. Ron didn't know when his abilities as a Keeper would come into action against Voldemort and being good at chess doesn't translate into being a good strategist in real life. In chess, there were no consequences when you sacrificed a piece. In real life, someone could die if you made a mistake. Ron felt as if the only thing he could offer the trio was his temperament.

But maybe that's the exact thing the trio needed. Maybe Ron's sudden bursts of anger and happiness balanced out Neville's moodiness and Hermione's calming rationality. Maybe it was Ron's joking attitude that kept things light hearted. Although he sometimes went overboard with his jokes, he never meant them to truly hurt anyone. It wasn't some sort of passive-aggressive act. Perhaps they needed him to interject in times such as these.

Ron pondered these thoughts as he sat against the trunk of the tree, feeling incredibly dejected. Could he really leave them now? Could he really walk out on them when they were about to embark on such a dangerous task? It would be beyond cowardice to leave Neville and Hermione to fight a dragon and escape a Death Eater camp by themselves. Ron's family definitely taught him one thing: leave no man behind.

Ron found it a bit amusing he arrived at his decision so quickly. Not half an hour had passed since he stormed out of the tent after hitting

Neville. If Ron were honest though, he was a bit frightened at the prospect of staying outside any longer. He had left the area of wards quite some distance ago and the Death Eater camp was way too close for comfort.

But Ron wasn't going to go back with his tail tucked between his legs. He was right; Neville was being a prick about the locket.

With that in mind, Ron carefully walked into the tent, intent on apologizing for hitting Neville but not for yelling at him about the locket. But the main living area was abandoned with no sign of either Neville or Hermione. Ron could hear voices in the back where their rooms were located and started walking over there. As he approached Hermione's room, Ron stopped as he heard the contents of the conversation. Unable to stop himself, Ron guiltily eavesdropped outside her room. He was in earshot but didn't dare peek inside.

"Stop moving," Hermione's voice sounded annoyed.

"Sorry," Neville mumbled.

"It doesn't look so bad. You'll have a bruise but nothing's broken," Hermione delivered the prognosis.

"That's good to know," Neville sarcastically said.

"You can be as sarcastic and fickle as you want to be, but Ron has a point."

"Oh, so you're taking his side?"

"I'm not taking anyone's side," Hermione raised her voice but stayed calm, "You shouldn't be wearing the locket all the time. You can put it down for a second or give it to one of us. It's better for everyone that way."

"Not you too," Neville groaned. Ron could hear the creak of a bed and a set of footsteps hit the ground. He concluded that Neville rolled off the bed and stood in front of it.

"Just for a little. Please," Hermione pleaded.

After a moment, Ron heard a heavy thunk on table by Hermione's bed. Presumably, it was the locket.

"There? Better?" Neville rhetorically asked.

"Loads," Hermione replied.

"You know I can't say no to you," Neville said in a softer voice.

Hermione laughed, "You know that's not true at all."

Ron could hear the bed creak several times, indicating Hermione's movement.

"Sit down, I'm going to take another look at the bruise. I think I can do something about it," Hermione ordered.

Ron could hear Neville sit down and Hermione cluck her tongue as she inspected it.

"I don't know. Not much -"

"Ow!" Neville exclaimed.

"Sorry!" Hermione apologized earnestly, "Didn't mean to poke it."

"S'okay," Neville paused, "You know you're very pretty."

Ron was sure his eyebrows lifted off his head at this comment.

"Neville," Hermione chuckled nervously.

Ron heard a sudden shift on the bed and didn't need to imagine what just happened.

"Neville!" Hermione said in a strangled voice, "I'm - I'm sorry. Just..."

"What? I thought - I thought you - well - you know..." Neville trailed off.

"Neville, I'm sorry. I really am - I just - I don't know how I feel about you or if I feel anything like...that," Hermione lamely finished.

"But me and you..."

"I love you, Neville. You know I do. I just, there's..."

"It's about Harry, isn't it?" Neville said angrily.

"No! Yes! I don't - it's complicated," Hermione stuttered.

"What's wrong with me?"

"There's nothing wrong with you! There is not one single thing wrong with you, Neville. There's just - there's just Harry," Hermione admitted.

"Oh."

A hush fell over the room and Ron slowly let out a breathe he didn't know he was holding. The tension was running in him and he wasn't even involved in the conversation! He couldn't possibly walk away now, so Ron kept listening for the conversation to resume.

"Neville? Please say something," Hermione sounded desperate.

"What's there to say?" Neville said in a deep, chill voice.

"Anything. Tell me how you feel. Tell me something."

"What if there was no Harry?" Neville asked.

"I don't know," Hermione honestly answered, "I can't think of that."

"I see."

Ron heard Neville abruptly stand and start to leave the room. Ron panicked; he would surely be caught eavesdropping on this sensitive situation. Luckily, Hermione saved the day.

"Wait," Hermione called out, "Neville! We need to talk about this."

"What's there to talk about? Neville repeated in the same angry, deep voice, "You like Harry. You don't like me."

"No -"

"Shut up."

Ron didn't like that tone one bit.

"Neville...let go of me," Hermione said in a shaky voice.

Ron was starting to worry and slowly retrieved his wand out of his holster.

"No," Neville responded in a voice that was not his.

Hermione suddenly shrieked and Ron heard the bed suddenly groan heavily as if something had been tossed on it.

"Neville! Stop it!"

The sound of fabric ripping was enough to finally spur Ron into action. He jumped to the flap where the entrance of the room would be located but found nothing there. Ron frantically scratched against the leather material of the tent but found that the entrance flap was somehow sealed. Meanwhile, Hermione continued to shriek and yell.

Ron stepped back and pointed his wand at the leather material of the tent, "Diffindo."

Thankfully, the charm worked and split a makeshift entrance into Hermione's room. Ron jumped in and was horrified at the sight. Neville had Hermione pinned on the bed, his legs and arms effectively caging her beneath him. Various parts of her shirt were torn apart, leaving her exposed to him.

"STUPEFY!"

Ron roared the spell but was agonized to see it bend around Neville. Neville didn't seem to even notice the spell as he continued his forced assault on Hermione.

"RON, HELP!" Hermione shrieked as Neville muffled her mouth with his.

Unable to think of anything else, Ron gave an almighty yell and hurled his body at Neville. He knocked the lighter boy off Hermione

and onto the ground. Neville tried to fight his grapple for a moment but Ron was too strong and had grown up with too many brothers. He pinned Neville to the ground and reared back his fist. For the second time in an hour, Ron punched Neville square in the face. He heard the satisfying crack of Neville's nose breaking. Neville groaned and brought his hands to his face, not bothering to escape from Ron's grasp on the ground.

Ron jumped off him once he realized that Neville stopped fighting. His best friend was still rolling on the ground, clutching his bleeding nose. Ron took one look back at Hermione and knew he had to take her away. Throwing a blanket over her, Ron ushered her out of the room with one look back at Neville.

Neville looked up in time to see Hermione flee the room with a blanket wrapped tightly around her. He met Ron's furious glare with a look of astonishment on his face. It was as if he had no clue what just happened. But Ron knew it wasn't the same as all of Voldemort's other intrusions. He knew because he saw Neville's face suddenly fall as he realized the consequences of his actions.

"Ron, I -"

Ron left before Neville could say anything else.

Neville came to Ron's room twice in an attempt to apologize. Each time, Hermione would suddenly shiver at the sound of his voice. Ron simply told Neville to fuck off and to leave them alone.

Ron did not know what to do to console Hermione. That was always Neville's job - and recently Harry's. He settled with patting her on the back occasionally and murmuring nonsensical words but couldn't do much else. He simply waited until she fell asleep. Ron tucked her in and sighed. She was wearing one of his shirts as Neville had effectively ripped off the one she was wearing. Fearful that Neville would try to confront them if he left the room, Ron settled with giving her one of his shirts until they could figure things out. Ron slept on the floor, his mind filled with Neville's unusual, cold voice.

It was Hermione who woke him up the next morning. She shook his shoulder, looking at him worriedly, her eyes going back and forth between him and the flap leading to his room.



"What's wrong?" Ron tiredly asked.

"I think Neville's gone," Hermione whispered.

"Gone?" Ron suddenly sat up.

"I went outside," Hermione gulped, "It was just to get some of my clothes, but he's gone. I couldn't hear him in his room so I looked in and he wasn't there. Ron...the Polyjuice is gone too."

"Shit," Ron realized what Neville was going to do.

Leaping up, Ron hastily scrambled to put his clothes on. Hermione was already dressed and biting her lip in worry. Once they were fully dressed, they investigated the situation in totality. Neville was neither in his room nor was he in Hermione's room. The Polyjuice potion was gone, but their prisoner Stephen was still bound in the conjured, extra room. That left only one logical conclusion: Neville was going after the Horcrux.

Ron and Hermione fled the room and ran to the hill that led to the basin where the camp was located. As they emerged over the horizon, they were shocked to see that the Death Eater camp was in full chaos. The dragon was off his chains and stomping through the camp, destroying everything in sight. Bright streaks of light were hitting the dragon but not affecting it in any way. The dragon, a Hungarian Horntail by the looks of it, opened its mouth and jettisoned fire in a wide radius, killing and injuring various Death Eaters and Mixers.

"Stupid, fucking idiot," Ron cursed as he started running down the hill, Hermione close behind him.

The Death Eaters and Mixers probably didn't even notice the two teenagers streaking through the crowd. They were too preoccupied with either battling the dragon or running away from it. Ron and Hermione weaved in and out of the crowd, sending spells in various directions as no one really attempted to stop them. They needed to find Neville and extract him before he killed himself.

Ron ducked as a body went flying over his head, smashing against the tent behind him. Clutching Hermione's hand tightly, Ron kept moving against the crowd, hoping to find Neville in the crowd of

people. Hermione shoved a Death Eater out of the way as she struggled to stay with Ron and avoid the dragon at the same time. Out of the corner of his eye, Ron spotted Neville's familiar face running from something.

"Neville!" Ron yelled.

That was a mistake. The dragon noticed the raised voice and swung its head to face Ron and Hermione. Ron suddenly froze, entranced by the dragon's gaze. He watched as the dragon opened its mouth, the two little slits with the all consuming fire noticeable. He could feel the heat as the dragon let loose, but he couldn't feel the pain.

Ron was shocked to see some sort of shield deflecting the fire away from him. Looking up, Ron could see wizards on broomsticks flying above him, their wands pointed at the dragon. Not bothering to see who saved him from certain death, Ron pulled Hermione in the direction where he last saw Neville. The dragon was now preoccupied with the flying forces. It flapped its wings weakly but was unable to lift off the ground. Someone had cursed its wings so it couldn't fly. The wizards on the brooms took pot shots at it as they circled out of its reach.

He spotted Neville streaking into a tent, something big clutched in his arms. Ron followed him and avoided a few more errant spells. Finally arriving at the tent, Ron wrenched it open and ran inside, pulling Hermione along. Inside, Neville had already opened the tent and was staring at its contents.

"Neville! We need to get out of here! The dragon's going to eat us alive!" Ron yelled at him.

Neville didn't respond, frozen by the sight of whatever was inside the safe. Groaning to himself, Ron crawled his way over to Neville and pulled the boy by his shoulder.

"Neville, we need to..." Ron trailed off as he caught sight of what was in the safe or rather what wasn't in the safe.

There was nothing in the safe.

"It's empty...Stephen tricked us..." Neville was in shock.

There was a sinking feeling in Ron's stomach as he realized the failure of their mission, but they couldn't dwell any longer. He hauled Neville up by the armpits and despite all of Neville's actions in the past twenty-four hours, he helped his friend along.

"We'll get it later. Don't worry. Right now, we need to get out of here," Ron hoped that Neville would recognize the direness of their situation.

"Right," Neville nodded.

Unfortunately for them, the dragon decided that they were its prey. Hermione shrieked as the tent was lifted off the ground, torn away by the dragon's claws. The dragon stood over them, its head twitching in anger as it stared at the three teenagers. Ron couldn't see any of the flying wizards that saved him before and knew of nothing that could possibly stop the dragon. The dragon opened its mouth and Ron could already feel the intense heat though the fire had not yet come. Frozen again by the dragon, Ron closed his eyes and accepted the inevitable.

Yet, saved by another *deus ex machina*, Ron was relieved to find a wizard jump in front of them and conjure a dark, blue shield. The fire couldn't penetrate the shield and Ron watched as the wizard actually pushed back the fire. Looking up, Ron spotted a masked figure jump off his broom and onto the dragon's neck. Racing up the column of the spine, the masked figure reached the head of the dragon and pointed his wand at the crown of his head. Ron didn't know what spell the masked man used, but it caused the dragon's head to explode in a brilliant shower of blood.

The mystery wizard waved his hand and stopped the blood from spilling all over them. He turned around and whistled lowly as he watched the dragon's headless corpse collapse before him. As he turned around, Ron was shocked to recognize the unruly black hair and the vivid, green eyes.

"You three sure know how to get in a spot of trouble," Harry said.

Neville shivered as he held on tight to Dean. They were flying back to Hogsmeade after the rest of Voldemort's forces fled the camp. There was no sign of Bellatrix in the aftermath, much to the disappointment of both Harry and Neville. Neville was never the best of fliers among his friends, and to be honest, he was a bit afraid of the height. But right now, Neville had a lot more to worry about than flying. He looked to his right and saw Hermione riding with Harry on his broomstick. More than a flare of jealousy erupted in his chest, but he kept it down.

Control him. You can do it.

Neville shook his head, fighting the turmoil within his head. Voldemort was incredibly pleased - Neville could feel the emotions running through his body and reverted to his Occlumency in order to shut the madman out.

Clear your head. Shut off the taps.

Neville likened his emotions to water flowing out of a tap. Different taps contained different emotions and it was up to Neville to block off each area so Voldemort wouldn't be able to influence him so easily. Anger tore at him as he was reminded of his slight relapse which caused him to attack Hermione. He would be lying to himself if he said he wasn't angry with Hermione at the moment, but he would never do that to her. Never. What was it Moody always said? Constant vigilance.

Control.

Neville felt himself go calm as he finally settled within his head. It was akin to a numbing feeling that spread throughout your body. He touched the locket hanging around his neck. He had put it on right after he attacked Hermione. They wouldn't understand. Although the locket definitely impacted him negatively, it seemed to serve as some sort of barrier from Voldemort's intrusions. The locket dominated him his thoughts and kicked out Voldemort's own influence. To Neville, it was the lesser of two evils.

"We're touching down in a second," Dean yelled, "Hold on!"

Dean pitched the broom into a dive and Neville found himself in Hogsmeade not a minute later. Except it was not the Hogsmeade he

remembered. It was reformed into a sort of military base camp with tents erected all over the place and soldiers wandering about. The rest of Harry's unit touched down a second later and disembarked from their brooms. Harry made a couple of hand signals and Neville felt Dean grab him by the arm.

"Can you come with me, Neville? We're going to have to debrief you," Dean ordered more than he asked.

"Yeah, sure," Neville quizzically looked at Ron and Hermione but neither met his eye. Neville's stomach sank just a bit more.

"Hey!" Neville yelled as Dean snatched his wand.

"Precaution," Dean apologized, "We'll give it back to you, don't worry. Just have to have Moody debrief you."

Hermione and Ron's wands were also taken and they were all a bit miffed at the rather formal treatment. These were their friends, why were so keen to follow protocol? Dean ushered them into a separate tent and left them with one guard. Neville looked him and down and found that this guard was carrying a gun for some reason.

"You're not a wizard," Hermione said from her seat.

"That would be correct," the man grunted.

"Why are you here then?" Hermione continued to quiz him.

"Classified."

Ron snorted disbelievingly. The Muggle man barely even reacted to Ron's rudeness. He simply spared a glance in his direction before reverting his eyes to an unfocused spot on the adjacent wall. Neville shifted uncomfortably as the silence grew heavier. He eventually spoke up, not knowing when he would get another chance to be alone with Hermione.

"Hermione, I'm so sor -"

"I don't want to talk about it," Hermione said in a severe tone, still not meeting his eye.

"But Hermione, you have to know that wasn't me," Neville pleaded.

"I know it wasn't," Hermione shakily replied, facing away from him, "Just - I don't feel like talking about it right now."

"Just -"

"Let it drop," Ron said in a warning tone, not willing to let the conversation go any further.

Neville opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by someone entering the tent. The recognizable stomp of General Mad-Eye Moody echoed against the stone floor as he surveyed the three teenagers. His magical whizzed over to the Muggle guard and looked at him queerly.

"Thorn, right?"

"Yes, sir," Thorn saluted him.

"No need for that," Moody said gruffly, "Stand guard outside. I need to have a word with these three."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as Thorn left the tent, Moody incanted various silencing and protection spells around the tent. With his back facing the trio, he spoke to Hermione.

"You can wipe the curious look off your face, Granger. Thorn seems to be a nice fella, but you can't go on trusting everyone," Moody was obviously watching them with his magical eye.

"Constant vigilance," Neville whispered.

"Something all of you could learn!" Moody rounded on them with a stormy expression.

"If Potter wasn't coming back from a routine patrol, he would have never found the ruckus the three of you created. How could just the three of you raise the heckles of a whole Death Eater camp? Not just any camp but Bellatrix LeStrange's camp! I don't know what Dumbledore has you doing, but strolling into one of Voldemort's

most trusted advisor's camps can't possibly be it!" Moody steamed at them.

None of them had a retort for Moody's argument. The plan had been outrageous and foolish in the first place and only blind luck saved them from certain death at the hands of either the dragon or a Death Eater. Each of them owed their lives to Potter's unit.

"I'm not going to bother to ask what Dumbledore has you doing. I know the old man left you a mission before he died so I won't ask. I owe him that much. But I can't possibly let you three wander the countryside by yourself. You do what you set out to do but you do it with an escort. I'm sure I can find some unit to assign to you," Moody ordered them.

"But Moody -" Hermione interrupted.

"No BUTS!" Moody yelled, "It's already hectic enough out there with Voldemort's forces raiding Muggle town after Muggle town. I can't have you three on my conscience just fancying what you will. You will be assigned a unit and they will follow you wherever you need to go. Trust me, it's better for you that way."

"That's not how this works..." Neville growled.

"I don't care, sonny! You might be the Boy-Who-Lived, but I'm the General of this war and I won't be having the three of you get in a crossfire. This is final. You'll only get your wands back if you agree to this," Moody delivered the ultimatum.

"Can we please discuss this," Hermione said in a quiet voice.

Moody snorted, "Suit yourself, you have five minutes."

After Moody left to their own devices, the trio turned to each other with worried looks. It was Neville who spoke up first, not agreeing with Moody at all.

"We should just leave at the first opportunity. We can't tell anyone about the Horcruxes," Neville frantically whispered.

Ron was mum on what to do, but Neville recognized Hermione's pondering visage. She was considering her options.

"You can't possibly go along with this," Neville implored.

"It's not like we haven't found anything in five months," Hermione didn't meet his eye, "Maybe we can stand with some help."

"What about what Dumbledore said? No one can know! If someone knows then that just increases the possibility of Voldemort finding out! Have you not thought this through?"

"Don't ever ask me if I didn't think it through," Hermione's voice was dangerous as she continued, "We've had no success in five months and the second we even try to infiltrate a Death Eater camp, we're trapped by Bellatrix. It stands to reason that she knew what we were after. It'll only make it more difficult for just the three of us to go chasing after that one Horcrux. One."

Neville leaned back and crossed his arms. Though he could see Hermione's point clearly, he wasn't entirely convinced. Dumbledore told them to keep it a secret for a reason. Did they not care what the former Headmaster had to say? Did they not want to honor his sacrifice? But Neville was stuck between two very difficult places. He wanted to stay on the hunt alone, but he knew Hermione didn't trust him one bit after the...incident.

Control.

"Fine," Neville stood up and opened the flap of the tent. He signaled to Moody that they would go along with his suggestion. Retrieving his wand, Neville popped his head inside one more time, "I'm going for a walk."

Ron exhaled loudly as Neville left. He sagged in his chair and turned to Hermione, clearly exhausted.

"I'll go wherever you go," Ron said to her.

"Thanks," she replied, "We're not getting anywhere the way we're doing things now."

Ron wanted to hold his tongue but he couldn't help himself, "Are you going to tell Harry?"



Hermione didn't answer right away, clearly not giving it enough thought yet. After a moment though, she delivered the appropriate response, "No. Not yet."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"We can't possibly tell him right now. Harry would rip him into pieces."

"I don't know about that," Ron said skeptically.

"You don't know Harry like I do."

Hermione left it at that as she stood up and retrieved her wand as well. After Moody gave them strict instructions not to leave Hogsmeade, they wandered around and reconnected with their militarized friends. They've been radio silent, so to speak, for the past five months and only heard whispers of the Minister's Army. Seeing it up close was a general shock as all their friends looked older and battle-worn. They were certainly not the same students that left Hogwarts nineteen weeks ago.

Off in on the outskirts of town, Neville leaned on a fence and stared at the Shrieking Shack. How he longed for simpler times when he thought that Sirius Black was the one that betrayed Harry's parents. It seemed ages ago and yet, on a calendar, it was just a little over three years before. Neville sighed as he prepared his usual Occlumency treatment, not wanting Voldemort to get the better of him yet again.

Clear your mind.

He was only a few seconds into his breathing exercises when someone interrupted him. Out of the corner of his eye, Neville spotted a figure leaning against a tree. He turned and found the masked man who killed the dragon staring at him precociously. Or at least - as precocious as one could stare through a mask. The masked man didn't speak - he only stared at Neville in unnerving stillness.

"Can I help you?" Neville called out.

The masked man barely shook his head, a movement so imperceptible that Neville had to blink a couple of times to make sure he was even real.

"Can I at least get a name? Not to be rude, but you're a bit creepy."

The masked man's voice carried over the distance between him and Neville, "Archer."

Neville raised his eyebrows at the odd distortion of his voice, "Okay...Archer. Nice to meet you."

Neville turned around and continued to look at the Shrieking Shack, hopeful that Archer would receive the hint and leave him alone. Unfortunately for the Boy-Who-Lived, Archer remained leaning against the tree, his eyes never leaving Neville. Unable to concentrate, Neville whirled around and stomped through the twigs and branches until he was right in front of Archer.

"What the fuck is your problem? You get your jollies off staring at people behind that mask of yours? You think you can get away with that because no one can see your face? Fuck you and leave me alone," Neville spit at him.

Archer cocked his head and wiped the spittle off his mask, "Temper, temper, Longbottom. It'll get you in trouble one day."

Neville swore that the lips of Archer's mask turned upwards in a mocking smile as he slowly backed away. Archer eventually disappeared into the woods, presumably heading back to Hogsmeade. Indeed, Neville's temper got the better of him and he could feel the anger radiating off him yet again. It was as if he were some sort of moody antenna that practically broadcasted his feelings to the Dark Lord. Taking a few calming breathes, Neville resumed his breathing exercises, hopeful to keep Voldemort at bay.

"Checkmate."

The crowd around the chess board groaned as Ron defeated yet another person. More Galleons and Sickles were thrown his direction as the betting continued. Ron was an unstoppable machine; he defeated seven opponents in a row and there seemed to be no end in sight. Still, the soldiers were used to gambling on

anything and no such competition had arrived in quite some time when it came to chess.

"What say we up the ante?" Terry grinned as he sat down.

"Oh?" Ron smirked.

"Every time you lose a piece, you take a shot of this," Terry pulled out an old bottle of Firewhiskey, much to the crowd's ooh's and aah's.

The crowd waited with bated breath as Ron mulled over the decision.

"I'll do it."

There was a roar as the pieces reset themselves and more money was thrown around as Terry sat opposite of Ron and started the game. A couple of meters away, Hermione shook her head as she watched the spectacle. Not an hour had passed and Ron already fit in to the group of misfits.

"Deplorable," Hermione muttered.

"Amusing," a voice from behind her chimed in.

Hermione turned around to find the Muggle Thorn. He was grinning as Terry already took a shot of the burning whiskey for losing an early pawn.

"At least you have the decency not to partake in such activities," Hermione complimented him.

"Honestly, the fact that the pieces move gave me a bit of the willies. I backed out after that," Thorn admitted.

"It's certainly a shock," Hermione bemusedly grinned as she remembered her first chess game, "I know you said it's classified, but what are you really doing here? I can't imagine Moody would just let a soldier from the Majesty's army to join on a whim."

"I'm just a ride-along," Thorn said honestly, "Here to observe and report."

"For Muggles? You're reporting to the army, I suppose," Hermione probed.

"Something like that," Thorn evasively answered.

"Oh! I apologize, I don't mean to prod - I'm just curious is all."

"No offense taken. Really, I'm just here to observe and nothing else. Occasionally, I do like to prevent myself from getting killed though," Thorn wryly said.

"It's been getting worse," Hermione agreed.

There a cheer as Ron lost one of his rooks to Terry. Terry seemed to have the upper hand but you never knew with Ron. He could very well be baiting Terry by boasting the boy's confidence.

"Not to sound demeaning, but what were the three of you doing wandering around a Death Eater camp?" Thorn queried.

"Long story. Too long for this," Hermione sighed, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude, but where's the loo? I haven't found it and all the stores are in disarray."

Thorn pointed out a relatively empty and untouched store a few stones down, "That one has the loo."

"Thanks," Hermione left Thorn to watch the rest of the chess match by himself as she made her way to the women's loo.

As she splashed her face with some water, Hermione realized she looked terrible. There were nicks and cuts on her face as well as dirt smudged over her cheeks. Her hair was interminably frizzed beyond reasonable care and she realized that she was still wearing one of Ron's shirts. She pulled her hair back in a messy bun in an attempt to hide the dirtiness.

As she pulled it back, however, she suddenly saw marks on her neck that were definitely not from the battle with the dragon. Several hand-shaped bruises were on the sides of her neck. She pulled the shirt down further and found nail marks along the top of her collarbone where Neville had been ripping her shirt off. She shivered as she touched the bright, red line of skin.

Picking up a bar of soap, she tore off her shirt and started scrubbing vigorously. She rubbed the soap into the bruises and lines on her neck and chest, trying to wash the evidence away. She wasn't aware that tears were spilling from her eyes and that she was rubbing her skin raw. Only a knock on the door broke Hermione out of her deranged reverie.

"Hermione? It's Harry. I don't mean to interrupt but Thorn told me I could find you in here," Harry's voice carried through the door.

"Yeah, it's me!" Hermione fought to keep the sob out of her voice, "I'll be out in a second, just freshening up."

"Okay."

Hermione hastily rinsed the soap off her chest and neck as she inspected the aftermath. The thin nail marks could be disguised as nicks but there was no mistaking the finger-shaped bruises on her neck. She would need to hide that somehow. A part of her wanted to rage at Neville and let Harry have his way with him, but she knew that Harry would most likely harm the boy. Though she hated Neville at the moment, she didn't want any blood spilled on her account. Hermione put on Ron's shirt and ripped off a piece of the bottom to fabricate a makeshift scarf to wrap around her neck. Realizing the rest of her appearance was unsalvageable, Hermione opened the door to find Harry rocking back and forth on his feet as he waited for her.

"Hermione," Harry smiled at her.

Hermione couldn't help herself; she launched his body at him and hugged him around the midsection, relishing in his warmth. He smelled of dirt and polluted air, but she reveled in his arms nonetheless. It had been too long since she was held in Harry's arms. Harry buried his head in her hair, murmuring softly into the thick locks.

"I've missed you," Harry whispered.

"You have no idea how much I've missed you," Hermione whimpered.

"Are you okay?" Harry said in alarm as he felt warm tears pool against his shirt.

"I'm fine," Hermione laughed nervously as she wiped the tears out of her eyes, "I'm just glad to see you is all."

Harry kept looking at her with an imperceptible look. The guilt was already crawling through Hermione, begging for resolution and release as Harry continued to assess her reaction. Thankfully, he did not press. He leaned in to kiss her lightly on the lips and amusedly pulled back when she wrinkled her nose at him.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't remember the last time I've taken a bath..." Hermione admitted.

Harry guffawed, chuckling at her preconceived worry that he would care. He kissed her one more time to prove that her state of cleanliness was the furthest thing from his mind.

"Don't worry, it happens to all of us."

Hermione snickered lightly but froze as she caught sight of something over Harry's shoulder. Harry felt her squeeze his arm tightly in raising alarm and curiously looked behind to see Neville approaching them. Hermione's hand was still squeezing his arm tightly and he could feel a shiver passing through her. He frowned in concern; what had Neville done? Turning around, Harry adopted his authoritative persona as he looked coolly upon the fellow Gryffindor.

"Harry, can I talk to you for a second?" Neville asked.

"Sure, what's up."

Neville halted, looking warily at Hermione, "In private?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at this request. He turned to Hermione and then back at Neville with a retort, "I'm sure anything that needs to be said can be in front of Hermione."

"No, Harry it's okay," Hermione detached herself and started walking to Ron's chess match. She didn't look back at either of them, which puzzled Harry to a great degree.

As she left earshot, Harry turned to Neville with an angry countenance, "What happened? There better be a good explanation for finding all of you in LeStrange's camp."

"We thought there was a Horcrux there," Neville answered.

It didn't surprise Harry that much. He was one of the few that knew about their hunt for the Horcruxes. He just didn't think they would place themselves in so much trouble without at least a hint of subtlety or stealth.

"Did you get it?" Harry asked.

"No," Neville said miserably, "It was a plant. There was nothing in the safe."

"So how many have you destroyed so far?"

"Just the locket and we can't even destroy it."

"Seriously?" Harry bewilderedly asked.

"It's not as easy as you think," Neville said through gritted teeth.

"Where's the locket?"

Neville reached into the top of his shirt and dragged the locket out. It glimmered even on the overcast day, catching Harry's attention immediately. Harry absent mindedly ran a hand over the pebble lying beneath his shirt, a stark contrast to the glimmering gold of Slytherin's locket.

"We've tried everything, but we can't destroy it. Short of finding another basilisk, we don't know how," Neville said as he held it out for Harry to see.

"I see," Harry murmured as he reached out to touch the locket.

Neville snatched it back and stuffed it in his shirt before Harry could touch it. Harry blinked furiously, snapping out of his daze as he saw Neville's precautionary reaction.

"It's a negative object. The more you're around it...the more...you know," Neville couldn't find the right words to describe the emotions.

"Doesn't make you the worse candidate for wearing it?" Harry pointed out.

"It's better than either Ron or Hermione wearing it."

Harry didn't quite agree with him but relented nonetheless. It was Neville's choice to make and he wasn't going to stop him out of his own accord.

"So you had something to talk about it besides the locket?"

"Yes," Neville straightened his back, a motion Harry recognized as someone preparing to deliver some sort of suggestion or speech, "Let me go alone. Moody doesn't want us to go off by yourself and frankly, I'm more of a danger to Hermione and Ron than any Death Eater possible. I can do this."

Harry considered the suggestion and immediately stamped it down, "No."

"What?" Neville clearly thought Harry would allow him to leave.

"No," Harry simply replied again, "You might think you can do it, but it's dangerous now. I don't know how much you've seen but there's constant raids by Death Eaters and Mixers. You stand a better chance of finding the Horcruxes and destroying them if we're with you."

"Harry, you don't understand -"

"Yes, I do. It'll also be better if we can keep an eye on you," Harry's eyes flicked towards Neville's scar and Neville immediately knew what Harry was referencing.

"I can take care of it," Neville began to grow frustrated, "Just let me go, it's better for everyone this way."



"Neville," Harry tiredly rubbed his forehead, already having made his decision, "Permission denied, okay? You're staying with us."

Harry started walking away from Neville, tired of the boy's antics and tactics. Neville was naïve to think he could possibly venture on a journey to destroy four Horcruxes on his own much less with Hermione and Ron's help. As Harry walked away, however, Neville called out to him.

"I'm leaving, Harry. You can't stop me."

Neville caught the attention of a few of the soldiers and caused them to stop the interaction. Harry was a couple of feet away from Neville because he started to walk away and as a result, he had to raise his voice to speak to him.

"Yes, I can. For the last time, you're staying with us," Harry said.

Neville felt the anger start bubbling within him, a precursor to troubling times ahead. He fought to keep it down, but Harry didn't understand. Neville's eyes flicked to Hermione, who was now listening intently to Harry and Neville's public conversation. Neville couldn't stay; he was a danger to everyone.

"Harry!" Neville shouted out, "I'm leaving. Now."

Neville turned and started to walk to the edge of Hogsmeade, a visible indication of his intentions. Harry narrowed his eyes and drew his wand, now catching the attention of everyone in the vicinity.

"Neville!" Harry yelled, "I will stop you."

"No you won't."

Harry flicked his wrist at Neville and sent a Body-Binding spell towards the other boy. Neville was ready for it and immediately countered with a shield. Prepared for Harry's instigation, Neville shot a spell back at him.

"Stupefy!"

Harry didn't even move to deflect the spell. He casually flicked his wand and re-directed the Stunner back at Neville. Neville ducked, surprised at the easiness in which Harry could defend himself. The anger was now clawing out of Neville, seeping through his Occlumency shields as it tried to break loose. Furious that Harry dare try to stop him, Neville let loose.

With an anguished cry, Neville stepped into a duel with Harry, "Flipendo!"

Again, Harry didn't even have to shift his feet to block the spell. By now, a crowd was gathering around the pair, entrapping them in a natural circle. Even Moody was watching with interest, not bothering to break up the duel. Hermione chewed worriedly on her lip, hopeful the confrontation wouldn't escalate.

Harry hit Neville with a light knock-back spell, flipping the boy over on his feet. Embarrassed, Neville scrambled forward and cast a vast array of Stunners and other minor curses to distract Harry. Harry waved his wand in a circle and caught all the spells in one magical net before dissipating them into nothingness.

"This - isn't - your - decision - to - make," Neville threw a spell in between each word as he attempted to force Harry into agreeing with him.

"No it's not. It's Moody's and he already made his decision. You're staying with us," Harry pointed his wand at Neville's feet and caused the ground to explode in front of him. Neville nimbly dodged the explosion but had to be quick on his feet to maneuver his way out of another explosion. Harry continued to pepper Neville with different Blasting hexes.

Though Ron still hated for Neville for what he did to Hermione, he didn't want to see him hurt in front of his eyes. He stepped forward but was yanked back by Seamus. Seamus shook his head at him.

"Don't worry, Harry won't hurt him."

"He's just playing with him," Archer was sitting on a chair, watching the lopsided duel.

Ron still held a worried look on his face as Neville started to tire from dodging all the hexes. Finally, one caught him off guard and threw him off his feet, sending him cart wheeling in the air. Groaning, he picked himself off the ground and threw a murderous glare at Harry.

"It's not Harry hurting him that I'm worried about..." Ron trailed off as he watched Neville grow more and more agitated.

Neville seemed to catch a second wind and ran at Harry, aiming different jinxes and curses at him. Harry neatly sidestepped away and swung his wand downwards. There was a loud snapping noise like the sound of a whip cracking. Neville was hurled off his feet and promptly fell on his ass, causing even further embarrassment.

"Enough!" Harry yelled at Neville, "The decision is final. You're staying."

Harry turned around and started to walk away, signaling that the duel was finished. Neville had other plans, however, and flicked a spell towards Harry. A red jet of light streaked to Harry's back, but Harry anticipated Neville would attack him while he was turned around. The embarrassment would be too great and the opportunity too easy. Harry whirled around, yanking his wand in the air and deflecting the red jet of light upwards. Taking careful aim, Harry made sure to hit Neville with a spell this time.

"Stupefy."

The spell was true and hit Neville square in the chest, rendering him unconscious. The crowd was quiet as they took sight of Harry stunning the Boy-Who-Lived. Moody was the one who broke up the affair and levitated Neville away.

Harry was in his private quarters, some time after the impromptu duel occurred. He was looking over an enchanted map of England, surveying the damage caused by the Dark Tower. Off to the side were several leafs of parchment. It was a collection of research papers that Harry scavenged in an effort to learn more about the Dark Tower. So far, most of it was an amalgam of mysteries that couldn't possibly be ratified. He heard someone enter the room and knew immediately who the presence was.

"Yes, Archer?" Harry asked without turning around.

Archer didn't respond, a favorite tactic of his, as he took a seat on one of the spare chairs lying around Harry's quarters. He leaned forward and picked up one of the leaflets concerning the tower. Harry allowed him his silence for he knew Archer would speak when he was ready.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Done what?" Harry rhetorically asked, knowing full well what Archer was referencing.

"It wasn't right for you to embarrass him like that."

Harry scoffed disbelievingly, "You're going to tell me about what's right and what's wrong?"

"Embarrassing him in front of everyone is low for morale," Archer said in his garbled distortion, "You may be leagues stronger than him, but he is still the Boy-Who-Lived. He is the one prophesized to defeat Voldemort."

"Never thought I'd hear the day when you would back Neville."

"I'm not backing him," Archer countered, "You should have just silenced him and left Moody to handle him. What were you going to accomplish by toying with him in front of a crowd? Did you want to impress Granger?"

Harry was silent as Archer hit the crux of Harry's reasoning. Truthfully, Harry couldn't respond with a good counter-argument. It wasn't so much to impress Hermione but to knock Neville down a few pegs. Even if he did defeat Voldemort as a child, the war was bigger than him and his hunt for the Horcruxes. There were other things to consider...

"What's done is done," Harry continued to look over the enchanted map, "I'll make sure to take your advice into consideration next time I run into Neville."

Someone else entered Harry's tent and was startled to find Archer seated in a lone chair, "Oh, I'm sorry! If you two are discussing something..."

"No, we're not," Harry cut her off, "Archer was just leaving."

Archer nodded in agreement and fled the room without another word. Hermione looked curiously at where Archer was previously sitting and posed a question to Harry.

"Who is he?"

"Who? Archer? Just someone I picked up," Harry cryptically answered, "Is Neville okay?"

Hermione noted Harry's change of topic but answered him anyways, "I wouldn't know. I didn't check up on him."

Harry frowned. It wasn't Hermione to leave her friends without worrying or at least knowing their injuries.

"Is something wrong between you and Neville?" Harry asked.

"We just had a spat is all," Hermione didn't meet his eyes.

"About what?"

"Just...Horcruxes."

"I see," Harry said, not quite believing her. Still, it wasn't his place, despite his curiosity, to demand to know what she and Neville were on the outs about. She would tell him in time.

"So...what's going on?" Harry casually asked.

Hermione stepped to him and wrapped her arms around him. It was comforting for her to be in his arms. There was something about the solace and protection Harry provided, a reprieve from the tumultuous world that constantly attacked and ravaged her senses. Harry gingerly wrapped his arms around her as well, laying his cheek on the top of her head.

"I just wanted to do this," Hermione whispered.

"Me too," Harry whispered back.

Neville glumly sat in his tent. Moody said to stay inside for precautionary measures and Neville was glad to be away from any contact from the outside world. The ease at which Harry defeated him was appallingly embarrassing. Had he really grown that much stronger in a span of a few months? Neville fought to hide the jealousy and envy of Harry's power. He took a few calming breathes and crossed his legs into an Indian-style sitting position as he resumed his Occlumency.

Control.

He was dangerously close to letting Voldemort influence him negatively during the duel with Harry. Neville had another spell in mind when Harry had his back turned but switched in at the last minute. The beast in his chest roared it's disapproval at the Stunner that Neville cast. It wanted something darker. It wanted something lethal...

Control.

He could feel his emotions finally washing away, the numbing feeling encompassing him yet again. But there just a tiny crack in his Occlumency; he could not stop the guilt from tearing at him. Neville heaved, a sob escaping his throat as flashes of his assault on Hermione replayed in his mind. He couldn't believe he was possibly capable of such an action. He couldn't believe he would attack Hermione. The guilt was starting to mix into his system and fuel something else. Something darker...

Control.

Neville regained his emotions and sat up, forcing his mind clear of everything around him. No matter what Harry thought, he was a danger to everyone. Though he tried his hardest, Neville knew he couldn't keep Voldemort out forever. It was truly for everyone's interest that Neville abandon the party and continue the search on his own. He resolved to find a way to escape Harry and Moody once the opportunity presented himself. Speak of the devil...

Harry entered the tent where Neville was meditating and placed a sealing charm on the flap. He also placed a couple of warding and silencing charms to make sure no one could hear the contents of

this conversation. He turned to Neville, who was sitting calmly in the middle of his room.

"Hello, Harry," Neville calmly spoke.

"Neville," Harry nodded to him, "We need to talk."

"That we do."

Harry pulled up a chair next to Neville. Though it was a bit awkward since Neville was seated on the ground, Harry trudged on nonetheless.

"I'm sorry about what I had to do out there, but I can't allow you to leave."

"I have to leave," Neville said it as if it were a prophesized statement and not a request.

"Neville," Harry took off his glasses to rub his eyes, "I'm volunteering my unit to help you. I know about the Horcruxes, but I didn't tell Moody."

"Moody's not going to be happy that one of his best units is on a baby-sitting mission."

"Moody knows what you're doing is important," Harry paused, "And it's not a baby-sitting mission. Going after pieces of Voldemort's soul is anything but baby-sitting."

"I know it's dangerous, Harry, but that's not why I want to leave," Neville revealed.

"Oh?" Harry was curious.

Neville didn't know whether or not tell him, but if he couldn't tell Harry, who could he possibly trust now?

"I can't keep him out forever," Neville pointed at his scar, "Sooner or later, he's going to break free and I'm - I'm scared of what will happen."

Harry was a bit surprised to hear Neville's admission. He thought for sure that Neville would rebuke Harry's protection because of the danger of Horcruxes. It only briefly occurred to him that Neville thought of himself as a danger.

"You're stronger than that Neville."

"No I'm not," Neville hung his head, "When have I ever kept him out? I've attacked you several times, I've hurt people..."

Harry was too caught up in convincing Neville to stay to notice Neville's guilty appeal, "You can do it! We'll help you and if anything...I'll make sure to stop it."

"Harry...if anything should happen, don't hesitate. Please. Don't hesitate to stop me," Neville let the implicit plea hang in the air.

Harry gulped, "I won't."

"Thank you."

An agreement had been reached between the pair as they stewed in silence over their own thoughts. It was Harry who brought an end to their conversation.

"We fly out at first light tomorrow to find Bellatrix and the Horcrux you claim she has," Harry stood up to indicate he was leaving, "Make sure to get some rest."

As Harry was about to leave, Neville stopped him and said, "Harry. Thank you."

Harry nodded and with a hint of humor in his voice, "You know what they say - live together, die alone."



The wind was brisk as they flew below the cloud line. Intelligence reported that Bellatrix most likely relocated to somewhere south of Liverpool. It seemed counter-intuitive for her to move away from the tower, but who were they to question the genius of a madman? True to his word, Harry led the unit out on first light in pursuit of the Horcrux. Although his unit knew they were accompanying the trio, they didn't know the contents or objective of the mission. Everyone in the unit had their own broom and Ron was allowed one as well since they knew he was a decent flier. Neville was riding with Seamus and Hermione with Parvati. Although Harry had reservations of pairing Hermione with one of their least experienced fliers, Hermione insisted on flying with Parvati.

"So where exactly are we headed?" Neville asked Seamus.

"Intelligence says that there's been a lot of movement south of Liverpool. Considering you guys blew up their last camp, it's reasonable for us to check it out. They also say that Batebox might be in there as well," Seamus answered.

"Batebox?"

"You know - Bates. The guy with the tattoos."

"So someone confirmed that Bates is alive then?" Hermione asked from her nearby broom.

"Another unit spotted him. It's a bit difficult to miss the guy," Seamus shrugged.

"What about his leg?" Hermione frowned, "Malfoy blew it out with a Redcutor. Has Malfoy been found yet either?"

"Apparently, Bates was walking on some sort of iron limb," Padma answered, "And there's been no sign of Malfoy anywhere."

"How does he survive all these things?" Ron curiously asked as he floated alongside the conversing group, "I remember someone telling me that Malfoy set him on fire when they attacked the Hollow."

"They say he's half-troll," Seamus guffawed.

"You can't be half-troll," Ron blankly stated.

"Why not?" Hermione countered, "Hagrid's a half-giant, so why can't Bates be a half-troll. It would certainly explain his seeming immunity to everlasting pain."

"Hermione," Ron said with a tone of a parent condescending a child, "There can't possibly be something that's half-troll."

"As Hermione said, why not, Ronald?" Padma agreed with her fellow female.

"Think about the logistics of it. You know - how could a troll ever..." Ron made a hand motion that caused Neville to shake his head.

"Ron! That's disgusting!" Hermione shrieked.

"I'm just saying! A troll's - you know - wouldn't be able to fit into..."

"End of conversation!"

Padma agreed and veered them away from Ron's continuous questioning of a troll's ability to impregnate a human female. Neville could only shake his head as Seamus and Ron continued to argue the semantics of someone being a half-troll. As Ron and Seamus continued their banter, Archer hovered over to them and stared at them for a bit.

"Cheerio, Archer. You mind not being creepy for a little while? You're scaring off the birds," Seamus chirpily addressed the masked man.

Archer didn't seem to care whether Seamus was referring to actual birds or the three females flying with them. He just pointed to his eyes and then waved his hand in a circular direction.

"Keep a lookout and keep the formation tight. We're approaching the target area," Archer said in his usual garbled distortion.

"You know it wouldn't hurt you to lighten up a bit," said Seamus as he maneuvered his broom so he was closer to the pack.

"It would probably hurt you," Archer responded.

As Archer floated away, Seamus turned to Neville, "Was that a joke?"

Neville could only shrug, not quite understanding Archer's sense of humor - if he even had one. He took a moment to lean back and tighten his jacket around his shoulders. For some reason, the air seemed to chill around him and a shiver ran through Neville as he looked around for the source of the wind.

"Bit chilly," Neville muttered, "Where's the wind?"

"It's not wind," Seamus cursed proficiently and jerked the broom to his left.

"DEMENTORS!"

Neville couldn't remember who yelled the warning. Once he spotted the cloaked figures, his mind started to shut down and his nerve endings numbed, a side effect of the deathly creatures.

"Come around!" Harry ordered from the front of the formation, "Package in the middle!"

Seamus moved his broom so he was situated in the middle of a rotating circle. Padma repeated the movement as well while Dean motioned for Ron to do the same. The rest of the unit moved in a rotating circle around the center group, their wands ready to summon their respective Patronus.

"Start the descent, wait until they're close!" Harry pitched his broom down slightly, leading the group into a gradual descent as the Dementors came closer.

The Dementors finally arrived, hunting down their targets with ruthless abandon as they swept over, around, and under the group of wizards. Neville watched as corporeal Patronuses erupted from several wands and harried away the soul-eaters. An almost silver dome protected the trio, Seamus, and Padma. They kept their descent at an even pace, not wishing to pitch their brooms too far lest they lose the shape of the group and allow a Dementor to break through their lines. A brilliant stag whirled around Neville as it fought a Dementor.

Neville could only watch, unable to even procure his wand from the inside fold of his jacket as he held on for dear life. Vicious words and voices attacked his head and he shut his eyes, hoping to prevent any sort of attack from Voldemort. Mocking cries rang in his head and he started to yell, desperate to drown out the morose tones and antagonistic voice of someone desperate to break into his mind. But Neville was concentrating too much on closing his mind and forgot to hold on to Seamus. His hand started to slip, inch by inch as his grasp loosened.

"Neville!" Hermione yelled as she watched him tip off the broom.

The feeling of weightlessness freed Neville from his imprisoned mind, but it was too late. He swung his arms in the air, flapping in the wind as he fell off the broom and hurtled to Earth. As he fell, Neville could feel the Dementors chasing after him, wanting to feed on the easy prey. Neville stuttered, unable to produce a Patronus as the Dementors gave chase to the falling boy. The Dementors couldn't see the silver stag bull rushing through them and reaching Neville just before a Dementor opened his mouth to steal Neville's soul.

Saved by the stag, Neville regained his senses and saw a tiny blot come closer and closer as it hurtled down to him. As the blurry figure came closer, Neville deduced that it was Harry who was racing to save him from imminent death. Harry twisted to and fro, expertly avoiding the Dementors as he came closer and closer to Neville. The timing had to be perfect for if Harry overshot Neville's trajectory, he would have to race back up and face the Dementors all over again. Even Harry couldn't withstand so much pressure from the ghastly creatures.

Luckily for Neville, Harry's trajectory was true and he latched onto the other boy just before he reached the ground. Grabbing Neville's arm, Harry yanked his broom upwards, anticipating that the added weight of Neville would cause the broom to slightly dip and making it more difficult to pull out of the death dive. The twigs from the tail end of the broom scraped the ground, but they successfully stopped Neville's terminal drop. Yet they were still in trouble. The Dementors refused to give up as it followed Harry and Neville through the winding streets of an unnamed town.

It was an odd sight to watch; Dementors were chasing Harry while a silver stag was chasing the Dementors. They flew through the small streets, no doubt alerting the Muggles who dared to remain in their houses. Neville held on tight despite the feeling of impending dread. He could feel when the Dementors would get closer as the voices in his head rattled his skull yet again. Harry could also feel the effects of the Dementor and urged his broom to go faster and faster. As Harry spun through an archway, he pulled up, almost pulling his broom into a hundred-eighty degree climb.

"NOW!" Harry yelled.

Harry's unit dropped from the sky, their Patronuses in tow as they sandwiched the Dementors between Harry's silver stag and the rest of their guardians. The Dementors shrieked and twisted their unshapely bodies away from the spell. Sensing defeat, the Dementors fled the area, leaving Harry and the rest alone. Neville, though, could not stop the clattering of his teeth or the visible shakes in his arms. As Harry set his broom down, Neville collapsed - the voices still ringing in his head.

Neville was aware of someone touching his cheek as he was prone on his back. His eyes fluttered open and his heart jumped to his chest as he realized that it was Hermione who was feeling his cheek and forehead. As soon as she realized that he was awake, however, she immediately stood up and walked away.

"He seems to be fine," she said.

The pain in Neville's chest was acute as he sat up, but it wasn't from any actual, physical pain. The pain was solely tied to a form of heartbreak.

"You okay there mate?" Seamus asked him as he pulled Neville to his feet, "Gave us a bit of a scare when you fell and collapsed. We were afraid - well, you know."

Neville indeed knew what they spoke about. Harry had his wand out warily as Neville stood on his feet but lowered it once he realized Neville wasn't a threat to the people around him. Only Archer stood near him, still regarding him carefully through his white mask. Seamus clapped him in the back with a wry grin.

"One helluva fall. You never keep it dull around here, Neville," Seamus grinned.

"Glad I can be your source of entertainment," Neville muttered, "Why aren't we on the move again?"

"Skies aren't safe," Archer said, "We have to stay on the ground."

"They're expecting us," Harry said with a grim face.

"Well - shouldn't we turn around?" Ron asked as if it were the most obvious question in the world.

"No point now," Dean shrugged, "They know we're coming so we should strike while we know where they are."

"Come on," Harry interrupted, "Let's get moving. Hermione, Ron, Neville stay in the middle of us and don't get caught out."

"We don't need to be babysat," Neville clearly didn't appreciate the sentiment.

"You're still the asset," Harry responded, "We keep you safe."

That was the end of that particular conversation as the unit encircled the trio. Neville had never seen them so grim and so serious before. Their eyes were constantly tracking as they walked through the winding alleyways of the town. It seemed as if Harry was heading for a bell tower on the other side of the town as their destination. For now, there were no disturbances as they kept their pace speedy but not exhausting.

"So what's the plan here?" Hermione nervously asked as her eyes skittered about.

"Find Bellatrix," Harry said as he waved his wand a bit.

"And then what? Just ask her for the Horcrux?" Ron implied that the question would not be received well.

"I'm sure she would be delighted to give it to us," Archer suddenly spoke up.

Seamus leaned over to Neville and Ron and whispered, "See? Another joke. This can't possibly be Archer."

"Where did you say you found him again?" Hermione was looking at Archer's back with a hint of curiosity.

"Harry just showed up with him one day. Told us not to ask any questions about the mask or where he's from and we just took it like that. He may be a creepy bloke, but he's never let any of us down," Dean answered.

"Except for the fact that he does the dirty work," Thorn carefully interjected.

"We do what we have to, Thorn," Seamus looked resigned to Harry and Archer's tactics when it came to dealing with Death Eater prisoners.

"What kind of dirty work?" asked the ever inquisitive Hermione Granger.

"The kind of things we don't talk about."

Seamus ended the conversation abruptly as he forcibly turned away from them with more than a hint of "don't ask anymore." Hermione, Ron, and Neville looked curiously at Archer, wondering what kind of supposed dirty work he would be involved in. He certainly looked the part of a psychopath, but none of his actions so far suggested him to be one of malevolent intent. After all, he did save them from the dragon at Bellatrix's previous camp. Lost in his thoughts, Neville didn't notice Harry suddenly freeze as he spotted something into distance. He almost ran into the Captain of the unit but caught himself in time to see what the hubbub was about.

Neville spotted someone sticking their head out of a window and waving them over. Harry signaled for the rest of them to stay back as he approached the signal caller. The moments were tense as they awaited Harry's verdict. So far, he was struck with neither a curse nor a Muggle weapon, so the prospects looked bright for the green-eyed boy. After what appeared to be an animated chat, Harry waved them over, signaling that the coast was clear.

As the whole unit came closer to the formerly abandoned building, Harry introduced the stranger to them, "This is Michael Henry. His girlfriend, Lisa, is inside and they've been hiding from Death Eaters and Mixers for quite a while."

Neville easily surmised that the young man was American by the tilt of his voice.

"Thank you," Michael said skittishly as his eyes darted about, no doubt checking for any signs of movement, "You don't know how long we've been stuck here."

"It's alright," Harry ushered everyone inside, "Thorn - take first lookout."

Thorn nodded and pulled his gun into a ready position as he placed himself in a window that overlooked the outside of the building. The rest of the unit followed Michael through a series of doors and makeshift barriers. As Neville hopped over a fallen bookcase, Michael explained the disarray inside the shop.

"I think it was a bookstore," Michael explained as he lifted a wooden beam out of the way, "Jimmy, Lisa, and I found it while we were running away from those big Death Eaters. We hid in the very back, going out occasionally for supplies. It's too dangerous though, that's how Jimmy..."

Michael trailed off and gulped when he said his friend's name. His eyes misted over but no tears spilled as he continued to venture further and further into the back of the shop. Wrenching open a final door, the unit crowded in and discovered a female of around the same age as Michael. She was holding a shotgun but looked mightily scared as she inspected each and every wizard.

"It's okay, they're the good guys," Michael eased the shotgun down and looked at Lisa with a purposeful look.

"If you say so," she whispered.

They both looked worse for wear, their hair matted and dirtied in several spots and their clothes in a state of unfit fashion. However, there was plenty of food and rations stored along the shelves of the back room. They were obviously prepared for the long haul.



"We were just traveling through here," Michael heaved himself onto a couch and exhaled loudly, "It was supposed to be just backpacking through Europe. You know - the usual thing for us to do. Then the tower business happened and we're suddenly out here, running away from fucking trolls and hoody things and Death Eaters."

Michael spat out the magical creatures with an avid hate as he told the story of their existence post-tower.

"Holed up in this shop for a little while. Jimmy went for some rations one day and never came back. We were...too scared to look for him," Michael ashamedly admitted.

Lisa, in the meanwhile, was oddly quiet, still staring at the wizards and witches with an air of suspiciousness and fear. Neville smiled at her, attempting to ease her discomfort, but it only served to seemingly startle her as she ducked her head and avoided his eyes.

"It's okay, she does that to everyone," Michael excused his girlfriend.

"So," Harry cleared his throat, "I don't mean to be crass, but have you seen any movement around here the past couple of days? Our...people...picked up heavy movement around these parts."

"None more so than usual," Michael shrugged, not meeting his eyes.

"Are you sure?" Harry pressed, "We'd really appreciate any help you have."

"Positive."

Archer suddenly stepped towards Michael, which caused the American to scoot further away from the masked man. Michael eyed him wearily and Neville could see his hand twitching for the sidearm on the table. Neville knew that Michael would never reach the gun before Archer would stun him.

"What's he doing?" Michael asked in panic.

"Archer..." Harry warned.

Archer still had his wand tightly gripped in his hand as he turned to face the Captain, "He's lying."

"About what!" Michael asked, scrambling to his feet and backing away from the other wizards. The tension was suddenly palpable in the room as Lisa's fingers tightened around the stock end of the shotgun.

Harry looked at Archer with an impervious look. Archer nodded back and kept his wand tight in his hand. Turning to Dean, Harry flicked his eye towards the front of the shop.

"On my way," Dean scrambled out of the room, presumably to check with Thorn.

"Look - I don't know what you guys think I know. I knew it was a bad idea to let you in here!" Michael said as he picked up his handgun.

"Put that down," Harry warned, not moving his hand to his wand in any way.

"Can't trust any of you!" Lisa suddenly spat, "Fucking wizards with your damn wands and magic. Why couldn't you just leave us alone!"

Neville shifted slightly, trying to conceal the procurement of his wand. As he was about to retrieve his wand from his robes, Neville felt a feminine hand grab his wrist. Hermione subtly shook her head and pointed with her eyes. The rest of Harry's unit already had their wands out behind their back or sliding down from their wrist holsters. They were well prepared to handle the situation.

"Just put the gun down and no one will get hurt," Harry warned again, holding up both his hands to reveal he didn't have a wand.

Dean burst back into the room, breathing heavily and hunching over. Lisa and Michael swiveled their guns over to him, but Dean paid them no mind. He looked straight into Harry's eyes.

"Thorn's gone."

Quick as a flash, Archer disarmed both of the Muggles fairly quickly. Their guns clattered against the ground as the unit trained their wands on the two Americans. They clung to each other, their eyes

darting around fearfully as they saw the business end of very angry wizards.

"Where'd you take him?" Harry said in a deep, threatening voice.

"I'm sorry," Michael pleaded, "They made us - they made us..."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry..." Michael said with desperate eyes as he wrapped his arms around Lisa.

A slight tremor shook the building, causing the dust between the floorboards to rattle and shake as the tremors grew. The unit exchanged weary glances, standing stock still as the building continued to quiver. The ominous rumble suddenly stopped as quickly as it started.

"What was that?" Ron whispered.

Neville felt the sizzle of magic a second too late. Fortunately, Harry felt it much earlier and yanked everyone to the ground with a shocking amount of wandless magic. Neville felt something pull at his navel as he clattered against the ground, his knees registering pain in the process. He couldn't process the pain, however, as he was shocked by the sight of the roof being tore off it's hinges. Lisa screamed as spells suddenly fell upon them like raindrops.

Harry threw his hands into the air from his kneeling position and conjured an umbrella of protection from the raining hellfire. His expanded Protego protected them from the initial volley, but he was quickly straining under the pressure.

"Dean! Seamus! Get them out of here!" Harry yelled as he held up the shield.

Neville felt Dean grab him by the arm and haul him into the corner of the room where the roof was still protecting them from the Death Eaters. He watched Michael and Padma exchange fire with some of the attackers as Harry continued to hold up his shield. He felt Dean twirl on the spot and heard the boy curse.

"Apparition wards..." Dean muttered as he aimed at a Death Eater and blasted him out of the sky.

Archer was dragging Michael and Lisa over to the corner as the Death Eaters attempted to break through Harry's shield. Currently, they were unsuccessful in their endeavors but even Harry couldn't hold up this piece of astounding magic forever. They needed a way out and it looked like Archer would be the one to provide the answer. Pointing his wand into the neck of Michael, Archer said just one word.

"Talk."

"I don't - I don't know! Get us out of here!" Michael said as his eyes were fixed on the Death Eaters riding on brooms.

Archer shifted his wand and pressed it into the throat of a surprised Lisa, "Talk."

"Archer!" Seamus yelled but made no move to stop him.

"Don't do anything! Please!" Michael pleaded as debris started falling on them from the aftershocks.

Archer twisted his wand into Lisa's neck which caused her to scream out in agony even though he didn't say a spell.

"Stop it!" Michael rushed towards Archer but was held back by a desperate Dean as Lisa continued to scream, "Make him stop!"

"Just tell him!" Seamus begged as his eyes flicked back towards the battle.

Harry was down on both knees, his hands quivering and the sweat on his forehead visible as he struggled to hold up the shield. Padma, Su Li, and Michael Corner were doing their best to pick off Death Eaters in the sky but there were too many. The trap was effective as the Death Eaters brought numerous forces to counter Harry's unit.

"The crazy lady - she mentioned carrying a safe with her at all times! She didn't want someone called Longbottom to get near it!" Michael dropped to his knees and begged for Archer to release Lisa.

Once the Muggle spilled his guts, Archer eased the pressure off Lisa and ran away from their shelter in the corner. Dean ducked a falling brick as he nimbly hopped over to their spot behind a crushed desk.

"What now?" Dean yelled at Seamus.

"We should..." Seamus trailed off as he watched Harry finally buckle under the pressure. The blue dome flickered ever so slightly, disappearing from view for barely a second. But a second was enough to strike Su Li with an unknown curse and send her spiraling into a wall. Harry quickly brought up the shield again and yelled over to their corner.

"Emergency Portkey! Queue it up!"

Harry was interrupted by a high pitched laugh. Neville looked up and felt his heart hammer even faster in his chest as he spotted Bellatrix sweeping in for the kill. She maniacally sped into the building and fired curse after curse at Harry. Harry held the shield, but Neville knew he would tire soon. Neville stood up and revealed himself to Bellatrix by shouting her name and pointing his wand at her.

"Neville, no!" Hermione yelled as she tried to yank him back but failed.

Even Bellatrix looked slightly surprised at Neville's sudden appearance in the middle of Potter's unit. Neville took that split second moment to aim a spell at her, keeping his aim true and accurate. The cutting spell missed Bellatrix, but Neville wasn't aiming for her. He had spotted the tiny, black safe kept around her neck as soon as she flew over the group. Bellatrix tried to grab the falling object, but it slipped out of her fingers and tumbled straight to Neville.

"Accio!"

Hermione and Bellatrix incanted the spells at the same time and the tiny safe froze in mid-air, stuck in a tug of war between two invisible chords. Neville hit her with a momentary Stunner, disrupting Bellatrix's concentration long enough for the small object to fall into the ground. Neville scrambled over fallen objects and a shower of debris as he tried to retrieve the possible Horcrux. Archer beat him to the spot and reached the miniature safe just in time.

"Portkey's ready!"

The unit started retreating to Harry, firing spells at the Death Eaters from underneath his shield. The comatose Su Li was being levitated along until everyone huddled around Harry. He was breathing hard, his hands still held in the air to keep the shield afloat. At the last moment, Michael and Lisa crawled to them, begging for forgiveness.

"We're sorry! Please take us back! You can't leave us with them!" Michael Henry pleaded.

Archer only looked at them, the Portkey ready in his hand.

"No."

In the blink of an eye, Harry's unit disappeared, leaving nothing but two Muggles and several angry Death Eaters.

Neville landed in a messy heap. As he untangled himself, he noticed that they were in a large area surrounded by a chalk of circle in Hogsmeade. Several other people rushed to them once they realized that the emergency Portkey was activated.

"Why don't we just use Portkeys all the time?" Ron groaned.

"If you ever paid attention, you would know that Portkey's can only have one destination and both locations must be set up prior to the activation of the Portkey. You can't just go on conjuring Portkeys to take you wherever you want," Hermione groaned as she cracked her back.

"Su Li's okay!" a mediwizard yelled as he checked her vitals.

Harry's unit was in a strong state of disarray as they climbed to their feet and dusted themselves off. Su Li and Harry looked to have taken the brunt of the damage; Su Li from an errant spell and Harry from holding his shield for so long. He swayed on his feet and Hermione grabbed him by his armpits and gently laid him down in her lap.

"Shhhh...you're okay," Hermione brushed the fringe of his hair out of his eyes.

"Let me take a look at him," said a soft, female voice.

Cho Chang was wearing the white robes of the mediwizards as she knelt besides Harry and ran her wand over his body, checking for any curses and jinxes. Hermione pursed her lips tightly and visibly held Harry tighter but said nothing to the older girl.

"Everything looks fine," Cho murmured, "Just used a lot of magic..."

Cho continued to conduct tests and Neville tore his eyes away from the spectacle. It was bad enough that Harry was already the object of Hermione's affections but judging from the way Cho stared at Harry, she wasn't quite over him either. Neville didn't feel like being the petty fourth wheel, so he marched up to Archer, who was still holding the miniature safe in his palm.

"Give it here," Neville demanded.

Archer pulled it back into his fist and looked back at Neville, "No. What is it?"

"None of your damn business," Neville said through gritted teeth.

"Archer," Harry gasped from Hermione's lap, "Give it to him."

Archer's stature looked none too pleased with this request and he made his rebellion evident as he kept the safe to himself.

"I think we should all have a look at why we're protecting Longbottom and his little gang and voluntarily walking into traps for them," Archer said in his garbled voice.

"No," Harry said more firmly, "Give it to Neville."

Neville held his hand out expectantly, expecting Archer to obey Harry's orders. But Archer had other plans.

"No."

He twirled the wheel at the front of the safe and pulled it open with his thumb and index finger.

"Archer. No - you don't know what -" Neville leaped towards him but it was too late.

The miniature safe exploded in his face and set him ablaze. Archer howled, his voice losing the distortion as it reverted to a high pitched scream. He swung around, the flames continuing to eat at the protective layers of his robes.

"Fiendfyre!" Cho yelled, "We have thirty seconds to get him out of there or else he's going to burn!"

The fire took the form of a snake as it circled around Archer, threatening to wrap him in flames forever. It was only the quick thinking of Hermione that could probably save Archer. Hermione pointed her wand at Archer and levitated him into the air. She swung her wand in the opposite direction and Neville watched as Archer flew through the air and landed in the Hogwarts lake. The rest of the mediowizards ran over to the lake to retrieve Archer, but Neville stayed back.

Kneeling down, Neville looked at the small safe closely. The Fiendfyre seemed keyed to cursing the person who opened the safe. Inside the safe, a tiny version of Hufflepuff's cup lay melted in a small, black goo. Neville didn't need to verify whether or not it was the real Horcrux. He could feel it within him as soon as Archer opened the safe and activated the trap. That was the real Hufflepuff's cup and it did indeed contain a piece of Voldemort's soul. It appeared that the price to destroy that particular Horcrux was very great. Neville turned around in time to see Archer being rushed up to Hogwarts on a trolley.

"They're taking him up to the hospital wing," Seamus said as he ran along the trolley.

Neville ran after them, the familiar sights of Hogwarts not registering in his head as he continued after Archer. They finally made their way into the familiar ward and Neville was surprised to see not Madame Pomfrey, but Ginny Weasley rush out to meet them.

"What do we have?" Ginny said in a strict voice as she strapped on magical gloves.



"Fiendfyre," Hermione said as she watched Archer continue to writhe in agony from the after effects of the burns.

"Dammit," Ginny cursed as she peeled off Archer's robes, "The burns don't look too bad here but...."

Ginny looked at Harry, "I have to take off his mask, I can't help him otherwise."

Harry looked hesitant, clearly not wanting to reveal the identity of Archer. It was only Archer's loud moan of pain that pushed Harry into the right decision. Harry just nodded wordlessly, unable to communicate his hesitancy at Archer's reveal.

Ginny cut around his mask carefully, not wanting to peel it off in case there was substantial burn damage to his face. Even through the peeled skin and the slight burns, there was no mistaking the familiar face of 'Archer.' She gasped, unable to help herself as she inspected the cold eyes and upturned, aristocratic nose.

"Malfoy?"

Neville carefully careened around the corridors. Here and there, Neville noticed several familiar but vague faces crowding the cramped halls of Hogwarts. It was filled from floor to ceiling with refugees and the injured.

The house elves did their best to keep the castle spotless but not even their fortuitous industry of cleaners could keep up with the ever growing count of harmed individuals. It seemed as if everywhere he went, Neville simply ran into more and more people afflicted by the war. Yet, Neville kept pushing for he was on a different mission.

Even in this dire time of need, the third floor girl's lavatory was left unattended and abandoned, the sinks overflowing and the toilets clogged with dirt and excrement. Neville rounded the mirrors in the middle of the lavatory and founded the particular mirror he needed to access the Chamber of Secrets. He hissed the appropriate word and stepped back as the sink folded within itself and revealed the secret tunnel to the ancient chamber. Holding his nose, he jumped feet first down the winding chute and landed several levels below Hogwarts. He wrinkled his nose, the aching scent of decay wafting deliciously in the tunnel.

Neville knew it was a slight gamble, but in theory, his plan should be correct. If the basilisk tooth destroyed the diary in his second year, what's to say it couldn't destroy the locket as well? Frankly, it was a short miracle that Hermione didn't think of this idea first. She, of all people, should have kept the basilisk venom in the vast catalog of solutions her mind contained. Then again, she wasn't in the chamber when the young Riddle possessed Ginny and only heard through story through Neville and Ron.

Neville navigated the unfamiliar but, at the same time, recognizable tunnels until he reached the entrance to the Chamber. It was still open; untouched since his venture when he was only twelve. He could still see the decaying form of the large basilisk that tormented him while he tried to save the youngest Weasley.

He dragged his body through the dirt and water, sloshing his way to the dead fangs of the basilisk. Neville dropped to his knees, careful not to expose himself to the lethal basilisk venom. Pulling out his wand, he severed a spare tooth and grasped it carefully, wary of the effects of the deadly venom. He turned the fang over, making sure there was an appropriate amount of basilisk venom still within it.

Indeed, the books were true and the venom remained even after the death of the large creature. It should be a simple enough job to destroy the locket.

Stowing his wand and still kneeling in the dirty water, Neville pulled the locket from beneath his shirt with his left hand. He stared at the shiny object, enamored by its powerful draw. He could practically feel the soul beating inside the locket, begging to be let loose. It was easy for Neville to mistake the pulsating in his hand for the locket since his mind was starting to retreat within itself, not willing to part with the locket. But Neville shook his head, breaking free from the slight entrapment as he pulled the chain over his head and placed the locket on a small piece of dry land.

As soon as he pulled the locket off his head, Neville could feel the whispers of Voldemort's invasion. It was like growing vines creeping through the slight crevices of his mind, worming its way in until it reached the root of his brain and revealed every little secret. The environment did nothing to help Neville, only furthering Voldemort's conquest to invade every part of Neville's mind. Neville shook as he held the basilisk fang, his body trembling as it reacted negatively to the onset of emotions.

"I can do it..." Neville whispered through gritted teeth, his body seizing as it fought the dueling minds.

He raised the fang in the air, holding it with two hands as he continued with the struggle. The locket was still on the dry jutting piece of land, sitting there mockingly as Neville fought to destroy it. The voices started as mere whispers but as Neville brought the fang closer and closer to the locket, it grew into a thunderous tornado, echoing through the chamber with vicious reverberation.

"Ahhhhhh!"

The fang crashed against the water as Neville purposely missed the Horcrux. He was breathing heavily and his shirt was soaked from the splashes of the unclean water. What he also thought was water on his face was actually tears spilling from the appropriate ducts in his eyes.

He exhaled shakily, wiping his face with the dry collar of his shirt as he let the fang drop into the water, hopeful that the venom wasn't so

poisonous that the mere disbursement underwater would harm him. Neville immediately snatched the locket and put it around his neck. He relished the cold, numbing feeling that fell over him as soon as the chain made contact with his skin.

"I can destroy it," Neville whispered to himself as he looked at the leering face of the statue of Slytherin, "I swear I can..."

"How is he?" Harry asked.

"He's stable," Ginny sat heavily on a rotating chair as she spared a glance to Malfoy, "The burns along his body aren't too severe. Luckily, the protective gear took the brunt of the damage for him. His face on the other hand..."

Ginny trailed off as she looked at Malfoy's previously unmarred face. A carefully crafted series of gauze was covering one side of his face, but underneath the protective layer was a mess of burnt and distorted skin. Ginny visibly winced as she remembered her attempts to treat the uncontrollable damage of the magical fire.

"He won't be able to get rid of it," Ginny said, "He's stuck with the burns for the rest of his life."

"How ironic," Hermione whispered from her spot next to Harry, "Malfoy would suffer the same fate as the one who killed his parents."

"Almost poetic, isn't it?" said a deep, scratchy voice from the doorway.

General Moody clunked into the Hospital Wing with his usual wobble, staring at Malfoy intently. He focused both his eyes on Malfoy's sleeping form but addressed the group behind him.

"Will the lad be alright?"

"He'll be physically fine. Just some superficial damage," Ginny answered.

"I lived fine with my scars, he'll be alright with his," Moody grunted.

"So you knew about this?" Ginny asked as she looked back and forth between Moody and Harry.

"You didn't think I was actually going to let Potter waltz into my camp with some freak show wearing a mask?" Moody scoffed, "I knew who he was from the get go."

"And you just allowed it?" Hermione curiously asked.

"I was there when we had to pick all of you up," Moody's voice adopted a rare somber tone, "The boy may have his problems, but there's no question whose side he's on."

Turning about so his regular eye was fixed on Harry, Moody spoke to him, "The folks won't be happy that they were left in the dark about Malfoy."

"I know," Harry simply answered, "I knew the risks when I took him on."

Harry stared straight at Moody, his confidence unwavering as he spoke of Malfoy. There was a hint of a challenge in his eyes, daring Moody to defy him otherwise. But Moody was in no mood to deal with Harry right now. He pulled the drapes around Malfoy's bed and limped his way to Harry to hand him a stack of folders.

"Attacks are picking up, especially in Muggle towns," Moody growled, "Voldemort's up to something."

"When is he not?" Harry asked rhetorically as he opened the folder and flipped through a couple pages.

"Anyways, as soon as you're good to go, Nott's unit is in London and they need to be relieved. You're up."

"Joy," Harry muttered sarcastically.

"Granger. Weasley," Moody tilted his head as he departed without a wave.

Hermione kept looking at Malfoy pitifully. His face was the only visible part of him through the half-closed drapes. He looked to be

sleeping peacefully, but the mangled scars and wrinkled skin on his face told another story.

"Care to clue the rest of us in, Harry?" Ginny pointed her chin at Malfoy and crossed her arms, giving Harry a strict look.

Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair as he took a seat next to Hermione, "We were just out on a usual raiding mission. Intel had some Mixers harassing a few Muggles along the Thames and it was in the beginning when things weren't so bad yet. I was flying down the river but got flagged over by someone."

"Who was it?" Hermione asked when Harry paused.

"Snape."

"Snape's alive?" Ginny asked in surprise.

"Full and well," Harry shrugged, "I don't even know how he found me, but Snape's always been creepy like that."

"How was he?" Hermione asked, always concerned for the well-being of others.

"He didn't look awful, but I can never really tell with him. Anyways - he lead me back to his safe house. It's inside a sewage pipe jutting out underneath a bridge. Quite a dank place, but Snape's always liked living in the dungeons."

Harry wrinkled his nose as he remembered the awful stench as Snape lead him through the dark labyrinth of tunnels that finally opened into a small living space. It consisted of only two rooms and what could be loosely described as a kitchen. Considering Snape's mastery of potions, it wasn't a complete surprise that the man could cook.

"Malfoy ran away after the Battle of Hogwarts. But the wanker forgot his injury was a bit severe. He didn't make it far, but luckily, Snape was around to save him."

"Snape's on our side then..." Hermione trailed off, not really forming her statement as a question but more like an off-hand comment.

"He always has been," Harry still remembered when Snape brought the deceased Narcissa Malfoy and the deformed Draco Malfoy to the now burned Godric Hollow.

"I wasn't convinced," Harry took a gulp of water as he retold the conversation, "I told Snape that Malfoy was a bit unhinged and I don't know if I could trust him to be stable on the team - especially after his father died. But the old git pointed out that I was doing just fine."

Harry absent-mindedly reached a hand to his neck to touch the pebble that hung on the chain. It was a movement that Hermione didn't miss but didn't comment on it. There was a glassy look in Harry's eyes as if he were recalling a time when things weren't so dire. Ginny coughed, interrupting him from his stroll down memory lane.

"Sorry to interrupt, but what then?"

"I convinced Malfoy to join our team, but he didn't want the stares of everyone else. He didn't want to be pitied by everyone because he lost his parents. I told him they wouldn't. After all, I was their captain, but he wasn't having any of it. He insisted on that comical mask to keep his cover."

"That comical mask probably saved his life or at the very least, the remains of his face," Ginny stood up and walked over to Malfoy's bedside to take a closer look at him.

"He seems relatively even keeled. Besides the mask of course..." Hermione trailed off as she realized she was describing someone who wore a mask at all times as 'even keeled.'

"There's...some things we did to help him focus the anger," Harry said.

"Like what?" Hermione pondered out loud.

Harry was guarded, his hesitancy visible as he slightly shuffled his feet and turned his body away from Hermione. Luckily, he was saved from explaining his actions by none other than Malfoy himself.

"Potter," Malfoy's first words were whispered harshly.

"It wouldn't kill you to be a bit nicer to me," Harry joked as he stood up and walked over to Malfoy's bedside.

"It almost killed me that you didn't tell me what was inside that damn thing," Malfoy said as he eyed Ginny with wariness. She was performing the usual diagnostics, her wand waving to and fro as she inspected the different levels of his magical ability and health.

"Hold still," Ginny ordered as her magical readings faltered from Malfoy's attempted movement.

"I've been lying in bed long enough," Malfoy complained as he struggled to peel off the bandages and wraps all over his body.

"Nope!" Ginny slapped his hands away from the wrappings, "If you take those off, your skin will never heal properly."

"What's on my face?" Malfoy reached a hand up to the heavy bandages on the right side of his face, but Ginny grabbed his wrist right before he reached it.

"You don't want to touch that," Ginny warned, her face sympathetic as Malfoy realized the consequences of his actions.

"I see," Malfoy said through pursed lips as he forcibly yanked his hand away from Ginny's tight grasp.

Ginny hovered awkwardly for a second, unsure what to do with her hands. She remembered that she was a trained mediwitch, however, and resumed her tests with the air and dignity of someone who had vast experience in the subject. Malfoy turned his anger over to Harry, glaring at him with narrowed eyes.

"I suppose everyone knows now?" he asked.

"Cat's out of the bag," Harry shrugged, "It was only a matter of time."

"Hmph," Malfoy grunted as he eyed Hermione as well, "You seem to be taking this rather well."

"Taking what well?" Hermione asked, honestly confused.



"Me," Draco motioned to the rest of the room, "All of this."

"Excuse me if I'm not falling over from shock," Hermione replied dryly, "Next time, I'll just leave you to die by fire."

"It'd be better than this place," Draco muttered darkly.

"If everyone's done hating the world, I do have some important news," Ginny cut in.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Malfoy's free to leave."

Malfoy immediately sat up in bed upon hearing the excellent news. Unfortunately for him, Ginny placed a hand on his chest and immediately pushed him back into the bed. Malfoy bounced off the pillow, glaring at Ginny.

"Not so fast," Ginny said in a clipped tone, "Under no circumstances are you to remove these bandages for at least twenty-four hours. Doing so will literally peel your skin away. The bandages are latched onto your skin with a skin-replenishing liquid soaked between them. The second rip it off, it's taking your skin with it."

"Anything else?" Malfoy said with extreme sarcasm.

"That means everywhere on your body," Ginny looked pointedly at a section near Malfoy's midriff.

"I got it," Malfoy snarled, "No fapping."

"That's certainly one way to put it," Ginny smirked as she pulled off her gloves with a snap.

Malfoy dressed himself gingerly, much to Harry and Hermione's amusement. He hopped around to and fro, shunning any offered help as he struggled to put on the most basic of clothes. Finally shrugging his robes onto his shoulders, Malfoy turned his attention back to the object that landed him in this calamity.

"Was that a Horcrux then? The safe?" he asked.

"I'd assume so," Harry looked at Hermione for conformation.

Hermione shrugged helplessly, "If Bellatrix thought it was important enough to hang it around her neck, I could only assume that it was a Horcrux. We'd have to ask Neville."

"Where is he anyways?"

"I'm not entirely too sure," Hermione bit her lip as she stared off into the distance, "He said he was going to do a round through Hogwarts to see if he found anyone he knew."

Malfoy was busy examining himself in the mirror as the conversation grew stale. He gingerly touched the bandages on his face, staring at it with some sort of grim satisfaction.

"Weasley - can I still wear my mask?" Malfoy asked.

Ginny eyed him strangely, "I suppose you could."

Picking it up, she tossed the mask to Malfoy. "I tried to clean it the best I could, but the burn marks won't come off one side of the mask."

Indeed, one half of the mask was covered in scorch marks and scratches while the other half remained an untouched ivory color. Malfoy hovered the mask in front of his face, examining the look. The effect was eerie as the burnt side of the mask was reflected with the heavy bandages on his face.

"Why are you going to wear it?" Hermione asked, "Everyone knows who you are and Moody's certainly not going to kick you out."

"Don't want them to see my face when I execute them," Malfoy said, mostly to himself.

"Very funny," Hermione looked disgusted.

"Who said I was joking?" Malfoy smiled.

Hermione wrapped her arms around her midsection, not liking the particularly gleeful look on Malfoy's face. Turning to Harry, she was

alarmed to find him smiling and shaking his head as well. As Malfoy left without another word, Hermione turned to Harry.

"What was so funny?" Hermione demanded, "There's nothing funny about executing people."

Harry sobered quickly but replied lightly, "It's not funny. I was laughing at Malfoy...mostly."

"I'm not sure I get this joke. It's not as if Malfoy actually executes people."

The look on Harry's face suddenly went from placid sobriety to guarded carefulness. Hermione didn't like the quick change of expression. Not one bit.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, the question hanging dangerously in the air.

Ginny slipped out quietly, recognizing the imminent argument. Though Hermione didn't know about Harry and Malfoy's rather...extreme tactics, Ginny was well aware of the on goings inside the Potter unit.

"Perhaps," Harry hesitated, "You should know some things."

It only took about fifteen minutes for Harry to explain the reasoning behind his rather torrid actions. Hermione blocked out the last eight minutes or so from either pure shock or pure anger. She couldn't quite identify which quality was stronger in her. She honestly did try to listen as Harry tried to use a circle of words to quantify and explain why he allowed Malfoy to do what he did, but she simply wasn't buying what he was selling.

"So let me get this perfectly straight. You order Malfoy to kill the remaining Death Eaters when you have them as prisoners?"

"That's about right," Harry answered slowly.

"Right then," Hermione gathered her jacket and immediately started for the door.

"Wait," Harry snatched her wrist before she could escape.

"NO!" Hermione replied violently, yanking her hand out of his grasp, causing Harry to do a double take.

"It's not as black and white as you see it," Harry warned, anticipating her line of reasoning.

"Yes it is," she hissed, "They're unarmed prisoners! You can't just execute every single one of them."

"We can't exactly take them all on as prisoners," Harry smartly replied, "We don't nearly have enough resources for that."

"That's bullshit and you know it," Hermione cursed, "There are plenty of ways to keep them imprisoned with minimal manpower. If you'll excuse me, I need to leave and make sure I don't kill anyone on my way out."

"That's completely not fair!"

"You should be the last one to tell me about fair," Hermione snarled, walking away all the while.

Harry took three large strides and caught her wrist once again. Hermione snapped around, an insult ready but paused as she caught the fierce, intimidating look in his eyes.

"Let...go...of...me," Hermione said through gritted teeth, flashes of a different panic now jumping within her.

"No."

Harry dragged her forcibly to a bed side tucked away in a corner of the room. Hermione protested all the while, but Harry was incredibly insistent. He let go of her wrist, still not saying anything to her. She had a retort ready for his juvenile behavior, but stopped as soon as Harry pulled the drapes that surrounded the particular bed.

Hermione gasped, raising a hand to her mouth as she looked at the injured female lying on the bed. Cruel gashes were etched into her face. The word 'mudblood' was clearly scratched into her cheek through some form of irremovable magic. Hermione spotted tiny skin

piercing all along her arms. The holes were now unoccupied but some of them were more than a couple of centimeters in diameter.

"She's one of the ones that fare better than most," Harry spat.

"I - I don't know..."

Harry turned to another bed and pulled back another set of drapes. Another unconscious person was laying. At first, Hermione thought that the person was very emaciated, but upon closer inspection, she realized that the person didn't have any arms. There were just tiny stubs where both of his arms should be. Instead of 'mudblood', the words 'blood' and 'traitor' were scratched into the left and right cheeks of his face.

"The Skele-Gro doesn't work for him. Some sort of dark curse prevents it from doing so," Harry explained.

"They can't...possibly - I mean," Hermione stuttered desperately.

"How many Death Eaters have ever been rehabilitated, Hermione? How many of them would quarter us in kind?"

"That doesn't mean we should..." Hermione trailed off as she continued to look back and forth between the two mangled bodies.

"No - it doesn't. But this is how we deal with it."

Hermione tried to collect herself, tearing her eyes away from the gruesome sight. Thankfully, Harry closed the drapes again, shielding them from her view. She looked at him in the eye, still strong in her resolve.

"There are horror stories to every war. The Goblin Rebellions, the Centaur Upheaval, World War Two...bad things happen to good people. That doesn't mean we have a free go at executing unarmed prisoners. We're better than that. We're not them," Hermione pleaded.

"You haven't seen them in action. You haven't seen them slice up people for the fun of it. Rape women, kill children just for a laugh. They're inhumane!"

"They're still people!"

"No they're not!" Harry slammed his fist against the wall, causing Hermione to flinch, "They weren't human when they took turns tearing that girl's skin with barbed wire and they weren't human when they cut off this man's limbs and hit him in the face with his own arms! They forfeited the right to be human when they took that mark."

Hermione opened and closed her mouth but no words came out. A part of her wanted to believe Harry; it really did. But her morals weren't letting her believe in Harry. She gulped visibly, maintaining eye contact with Harry as she tried to force her point across.

"I know you're angry. I know you've seen things that I can't possibly imagine. But I can't stand here and say I approve of this. I can't say that I agree with what would you do," Hermione shakily said.

"You don't have to approve," Harry said softly, leaning his head against hers so their eyes were inches away, "You just have to understand."

It took several moments before Hermione nodded, the movement causing both of their heads to wobble. Though she still felt strongly against Harry's course of action, she knew not the circumstances involved in participating in the war. For all their supposed importance, Hermione knew that she, Neville, and Ron were so far spared from the terrible atrocities of a day to day soldier.

"Don't talk about this anymore," Hermione requested, "I'm not shutting it out of my mind, but it's best that I don't hear what you and Malfoy do."

Harry nodded, understanding her reluctance to accept this particular side of him. It was a new development, one that Harry could not foresee. Yet it was a product of the Death Eaters and Voldemort himself. Retribution must be paid; if not in blood then in death.

"You're hurt," Harry frowned as his eyes flickered downwards and spotted a series of bruises around her collarbone.

"From the fight?" Hermione frowned as she followed Harry's eyes. As she looked at the injury in question, she realized it was not from the fight that just occurred.

"It's nothing," Hermione hastily pulled her robes around her, not wanting Harry to see the damage caused by Neville's...outburst.

"Don't be prideful," Harry admonished, "Even minor injuries can take their toll if you don't..."

Harry trailed off as he pulled back the robe to find finger-shaped bruises adorning the bottom of her neck and upper part of her chest. He held his finger above one of the bruises and was mortified to see that it was indeed a human hand.

"What happened?" Harry whispered harshly, his voice tight and his countenance stormy.

"I..." Hermione couldn't speak as her voice caught in her throat.

Her eyes belied a panic and a fear. A fear that Harry would fly off the handle much as he did against Voldemort. Hermione knew the breadth of his passion for her and the consequences should Harry find out what truly happened.

"Someone must have grabbed me when we were trying to Apparate," Hermione feebly lied.

Unfortunately for her, she was never the best poker player of the group and Harry read her face easily.

"Hermione. What happened?" Harry asked again, if not a bit impatiently.

Hermione could see the drapes shudder slightly, a reverberation from Harry's magical effects. She was left in a dilemma, a rock and a hard place. If she told Harry what happened, she sincerely feared for Neville's life. If she didn't tell Harry what happened, he would take that as a personal insult and definitely take Neville's life once he undoubtedly found out. She chose the former option, hoping she could have some damage control.

"Something happened...with Neville..."

The bed drapes stopped shaking and an unnerving stillness fell over the room. Hermione looked at Harry anxiously, worried at what he was going to do now that he knew. Harry abruptly turned about, striding quickly to the exit of the wing.

"Harry!" Hermione called out after him, needing to half-heartedly jog to keep up with his pace.

"Harry, please! You know it was Voldemort! He can still break through even with Neville's improvements in Occlumeny. Harry!" Hermione tugged on his arm but Harry speechlessly marched onwards with only one destination and one person in mind.

"Where's Neville?" Harry demanded as he found Seamus and the rest of the group.

"Think he said that he was making a round," Ron piped up, "Should be back soon though."

Harry's eyes swiveled to Ron, narrowing dangerously.

"Did you know about it?" Harry asked.

"About what?" said Ron in alarm.

Harry tried to subtly look at Hermione, but the rest of the unit caught the purposeful glance and looked at the girl in question. Hermione ducked her head, not willing to reveal the events of that night to a large group of people.

"I took care of it..." Ron gulped, not used to being on Harry's bad side.

Harry opened his mouth, no doubt with a shameful and intimidating retort in mind, but paused when he caught sight of something over their shoulders. They all turned once they realized that Harry was rendered speechless. Hermione's eyes widened as she found Neville walking tiredly to the assembled group. She almost called out to Neville as a warning but stopped herself because she ashamedly admitted that a part of her wanted to see what would happen.



Neville, on his behalf, looked the worse for wear as he dragged his body to Harry's unit. His head was ducked, his chin tucked to his chest in a dispirited posture as he blindly walked. His clothes were still mildly soaked from his escapade but a hastily cast drying charm cleaned the dirtier parts of his clothing. He didn't notice that Harry was suddenly in front of him until the other boy cleared his throat. Neville stopped once he saw Harry's combat boots and raised his eyes, wondering why Harry was in front of him.

Neville looked up and only saw the fiery anger in Harry's eyes for approximately two seconds. The next thing he saw were stars as Harry's fist connected with his temple. Neville groaned as he collapsed on the ground, his face pulsing from the sudden physical attack. In the background, Neville heard the shocked gasps and cries from Harry's unit. Neville rolled over and peeked an eye out to see one face and one face only.

Hermione was looking at him in shock but not in surprise. It didn't take very long for Neville to piece together the puzzle. Harry knew - he had to have known what happened between Neville and Hermione on that disastrous night. It was Hermione's expression that crushed Neville, not the sudden blow to his head. Her face was tight and her mouth was ajar but the look on her eyes was not one of sympathy or compassion.

It was a look of relief on her face.

Neville felt himself being dragged up by the collar of his shirt and he raised his already bruising eye to look at Harry's fierce green ones.

"You're free to fucking leave whenever you want," Harry spat in his face.

It was dark.

Thorn could hear the whispers of other people around him but someone had placed a blindfold over his eyes quite some time ago. His hands were bound by some sort of magical spell and even though he could feel his vocal chords twitching, no sound came out of his mouth. Judging by the lack of ultraviolet rays hitting his skin, Thorn also determined that he was inside some sort of facility. The prospects looked glum for Thorn.

Thorn's ears twitched as he heard faint voices leaking through whatever door stood between him and freedom. They were low and scratchy as if they were heavy smokers. Thorn leaned his head towards the door, hoping to catch a snippet of the conversation.

"Why are we even keeping him?" asked the first man.

"The Dark Lord said he's going to be needed for something. Something important," said the second man.

"What? Information? That's useless. We tried to break him already. They enchanted him with something so he won't reveal Longbottom's location," the first man explained.

"No," the second man clucked disapprovingly, "The Dark Lord needs him for something else. Said he's going to put on a show."

"A show?"

"Something big."

Thorn gulped, the acidic feelings in his stomach bubbled to the forefront of his mind, a physical reaction to the conversation between the two men. He needed escape and he needed to escape immediately.

"He's gone."

The statement was irreversibly simple. Following yet another punch in the face, Neville disappeared without as much as a good-bye to anyone. One quick look on the Marauder's Map was all it took to confirm Dean's statement.

"Good riddance," Malfoy muttered.

"For Merlin's sake, why are you still wearing the mask?" Seamus bewilderedly asked him.

Malfoy stared back at him, not speaking and not moving.

"I hate you," Seamus pointed at him, "I hope you know that. You're also incredibly creepy."

"And least he doesn't have the voice anymore," Dean pointed out.

"If everyone's done spoiling Malfoy with attention, there are important matters at hand," Ginny said from her spot near the door.

Harry's unit was assembled in one of the few classrooms not used as a makeshift triage area. Ron and Hermione were included as well as Ginny. Neville, obviously, was nowhere to be seen.

"Ginny's right," Hermione interrupted their commotion, "We have to go after Neville."

All eyes swiveled to Harry, searching for an answer. Harry was staring out the window, deep in thought though he obviously heard Hermione's question. Hermione looked at him nervously, but squashed her skittish feelings.

"Harry, I know what Neville did was wrong, but we can't leave him to go after the Horcruxes by himself. He won't last a second out there," Hermione pleaded.

The unit kept looking at the exchange between Harry and Hermione, knowing that their comments would go unheard by their Captain. It was Harry's responsibility alone to decide whether or not they should chase after Neville. The only person who could convince him to do so was the brunette pleading her case in front of him.

"Neville can make it himself," Harry said confidently.

"I don't know about that," Ron interjected.

"Are you sure?" Harry looked back at him inquisitively.

Ron exchanged a slight look with Hermione and nodded, "Even if he were to find the Horcruxes, he's been out of sorts ever since we picked up the locket. I don't know how long he can even go without - you know - losing it."

"Man makes a point," Seamus leaned back, crossed his arms over his head, and propped his feet on Su Li's lap.

"Neville -" Su Li forcefully pushed the Irishman's feet off her lap, "- is also less likely to be caught if he takes the necessary precautions and blends into the Muggle environment. Whether we like it or not, we tend to make a lot of noise whenever we travel."

"We should leave him," Malfoy cut in.

"That's a surprise if I've ever heard one," Seamus cheekily added.

Malfoy pushed off the desk he was leaning on, "Longbottom's got enough problems as it is. What's to say another 'attack' won't occur while we're in the middle of a fight. I, for one, don't fancy getting a Stunner in the back when I'm trying to tear some Death Eater to shreds."

"Neville wouldn't do that," Hermione defended him.

"Didn't stop him from attacking you, did it?" Malfoy egged her on.

"Enough," Harry glared warningly at Malfoy. Malfoy snorted and took up a spot near the window.

"I know it didn't," Hermione said through gritted teeth, "But that doesn't change the fact that Neville's the only one that can defeat Voldemort."

"The prophecy's wishy-washy anyways," Padma rebutted, "Neville might be destined to defeat Voldemort but that doesn't mean he's the only person that can stop Voldemort. Harry, for example, could defeat Voldemort but not kill him and leave it up to Neville. The whole prophecy business is a complicated case of semantics anyways. From what I can tell, Neville hasn't shown one bit of decisive magical power that could possibly defeat Voldemort."

Hermione was taken aback by the sudden and definitive analysis laid down by the Ravenclaw. She fumed but was unable to conjure a response since, in essence, Padma was correct. Hermione had seen Voldemort's capabilities first hand and if Neville's weakness in his mind was any sign of things, the Boy-Who-Lived was, so far, unable to even compete with the Dark Lord.

"Still leave the Horcruxes though," Su Li pondered.

"Can't we just go after them ourselves? Is there anything in the prophecy rulebook that says we're not allowed to destroy the Horcruxes either?" Dean asked Hermione.

"No," Hermione pursed her lips, "If Dumbledore can destroy one, I think any of us can destroy one."

"Still," Seamus idly tossed his wand in the air, "I would feel a bit on the shameful side if we left Neville out in the cold."

"He wanted to go anyways. He told me so himself when he first got here," Harry reasoned.

"And since when have you listened to every single request anyone makes?" Hermione rhetorically asked, "Neville's not in a right state of mind. He thinks that he brings harm to everyone around him -"

"He does," Malfoy interrupted.

"-BUT," Hermione shot a disgusted look at the Slytherin, "He needs help. He can't possibly do this alone."

The case was laid out in front of Harry. All the facts were presented to him from different perspectives, giving him a more holistic view of matter at hand. Harry glanced to Hermione and saw the pleading and hopeful look on her face. He admired her belief in her friends, but Harry was not the same. He couldn't forgive Neville so easily.

"He won't do it alone," Harry delivered the verdict.

"Okay, let's go," Hermione stood up and started for the door but noticed that Harry wasn't moving.

"I said he won't do it alone," Harry clarified, "But it's not going to be us that will be following him."

"If not us, then who?" Ron curiously asked. Though Neville was his best friend, the darkness in him scared Ron to the point of desertion.

"Someone I know," Harry mysteriously answered.

"Harry, who?" Hermione begged.

"I can't say right now."

Hermione looked at him skeptically, disbelieving his sincerity.

"Decision's final, Hermione. If Neville wants to go, he gets to go. If he really is destined to beat Voldemort, he can find a way to do it."

Harry walked into the dark, musky hallway of Grimmauld's Place, intent on finding the lone inhabitant. It smelled foul and of stale alcohol. The strong smell was easily identifiable from even the foyer of the house. There was a rustle in the kitchen and Harry took long strides down the dark corridor, his wand kept firmly in his robes for he knew there was no danger up ahead.

The kitchen was a respectable mess with dishes piled a foot high in the sink and rotten food lying on the table. Scores and scores of bottles lined the counters, tables, and sink. If Harry was a drinking man, he would have been impressed by the variety and sheer volume of alcohol that was evidently consumed. Even more impressive was the fact that all this alcohol was consumed by one man. Who was that one man?

Sirius Black.

The person in question was rustling around the refrigerator, no doubt procuring another bottle of whiskey or maybe rum. The former was the drink in question and Sirius didn't hesitate to pop the flask and take three gulps. Harry sighed as Sirius had yet to notice him.

"Ahem," Harry coughed.

Sirius kept drinking.

"Sirius," Harry said.

No response.

CRACK.

Harry slammed his fist against the table. Sirius spun on his heel but in his drunken state, the sudden change of balance was too much for him and he toppled over, the whiskey spilling all over his already dirtied shirt. Sirius looked at Harry through his overgrown, shaggy hair. His eyes were bloodshot but wide as Harry stood before him with an annoyed look on his face.

"James?" Sirius whispered astonished, "Is that really you? I knew you'd come back."

Harry had to refrain from rolling his eyes. He quickly cast a cleaning and sobriety charm on Sirius, hoping that it would at least refresh one of the last Marauders. Sirius shook his head, not used to the sudden sobriety. It had been some time since he was not under the influence.

"Harry...what's...what's going on?" Sirius muttered, still rubbing his head in confusion.

Harry picked up the bottle of whiskey that had rolled to his feet, "You've been drinking."

"I think that much is obvious," Sirius groaned as he came to his feet.

"Good to see you're participating in the war," Harry sardonically added as he did a three hundred and sixty degree turn to survey the mess.

"What war?" Sirius tiredly said, "No one's hurt. Everyone's alive except for James and Lily. This is no war. This is just Voldemort playing with us."

"People have been hurt."

"Muggles have been hurt," Sirius sat down in a chair that was thankfully unoccupied by bottles of alcohol, "Death Eaters have been hurt. Tell me, Harry, who have you lost in your unit?"

"My parents died. I think that counts," Harry harshly said.

"I know," Sirius said with glassy eyes, "I'd give anything to see them again."

"I suppose it would have helped if you appreciated them before they died," Harry cleared a seat and placed it in front of Sirius before sitting on it, "Now all you have left is Remus and Remus is doing important things."

"Remus -" Sirius quoted the name, "- is not even in Britain. He's off somewhere safe trying to 'recruit' people for the war. He ran away too. He just had a good excuse."

"Maybe," Harry nodded, "But at least he has an excuse. When's the last time you've even gone outside?"

"Had to raid a Muggle store for some of their alcohol," Sirius shrugged, "Not as strong, but it does the trick."

"So now you're looting Muggles for their alcohol," Harry leaned back and crossed his arms, "Bravo, Sirius. You've certainly hit a new low."

"And look at you," Sirius snarled, "High and mighty, leading your unit against Voldemort. You think you have a chance against him? You think ANY of us do?"

Sirius stood up and started pacing, waving his arms maniacally.

"I thought the Dark Tower was a myth. A legend passed down to scare little children. But it's real," Sirius dramatically turned his head to the sky as if he were looking through the walls and staring at the tower.

Harry leaned forward, not having heard this speech before, "What do you know about it?"

"The myth says that the Tower was used by the Founders in an attempt to unite the Muggle and Magical world. The Founders believed that the Muggles would need some help understanding their ways. So inside the tower is a strong compulsion charm that...sways...Muggles their way."



"That's it? It's used to control Muggles?" Harry asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Of course not," Sirius scoffed, "What's the point of the tower if it's only use is to control Muggles. It doesn't even control them; it just makes them more amenable to magical content. In this case, Voldemort's the one up there so they open up to him easily."

"That's how Voldemort gets the Mixers?" Harry asked.

"Probably," Sirius wheeled about, pacing quicker and quicker, "But that's not the end game. At the very top of the tower is a mirror. A shining beacon that uses the celestial alignments of the planet and the sun to power it's magic."

"What's the mirror do?"

"It does what the Mirror of Erised can't do," Sirius turned to Harry with a meaningful look on his face, "It fulfills your greatest desire."

Harry frowned, slightly disappointed that he didn't come to Sirius before. Evidently, the drunk knew a lot of information about the tower. How did he overlook such a valuable resource? Then again, Harry was in no mood to deal with Sirius' drunken moods.

"So how come we're not all dead? How come Voldemort hasn't killed us all and fulfilled his desire?" Harry asked the obvious question.

"I don't know," Sirius shrugged, "That's where the tale ends. They say it takes a great cost to fulfill that desire. A cost that is almost too much to bear. Almost."

"Why would the Founders build such a thing? Something so dangerous?" Harry pondered.

"They needed a way to prove to the most stubborn of Muggles that magic was indeed real. What better way than to have your heart's greatest desire? Gryffindor believed in the good of people but for once Slytherin might have been right. Sometimes, you shouldn't fulfill your heart's greatest desire. Men are easy to corrupt, especially when they've had a taste of power," Sirius somberly intoned.

"So what's Voldemort waiting for?"

"I don't know. That's why he's playing with us. Toying with us. There's no use to any of this," Sirius sat down and opened a half-filled bottle of vodka.

Harry summoned the drink away and threw it against the ground. Sirius shrugged and reached for another libation. Harry repeated the process, unsympathetically not allowing the older man to drink.

"Why are you here, Harry? Surely it's not to start a rehabilitation process for me," Sirius was growing angry at Harry's tactics.

"Neville is still destined to defeat him," Harry decided to use the prophecy to back his reasoning for once.

"Neville's disappeared around the countryside, probably too shocked by Dumbledore's death," Sirius said glumly.

"We've found him - or at least, we found him for a while," Harry informed him.

Sirius was now interested, "Did you now? What do you mean for a while? Is he okay? Are Ron and Hermione okay?"

"Hermione and Ron are with me. They're completely safe."

"And Neville?"

"He's taken off," Harry purposefully omitted the reasons for Neville's departure, "He's gone to take on Voldemort alone."

"Foolish boy," Sirius stamped at the ground angrily, "He's always been hard headed. Thinks that he's safer by himself."

Harry bit his lip, angry that he couldn't reveal Neville's weakness, "That's why I'm here."

"He's not here," Sirius blinked, "I would have obviously told you if he was here."

"No," Harry had to roll his eyes this time at Sirius's idiocy, "I need you to find him."

"Me?" Sirius pointed at himself, "Isn't that what you should be doing?"

"Unlike you, some of us have responsibilities. Some of us have to defend people from Death Eaters and Mixers. We don't have the resources for it," Harry smoothly lied.

"I...I don't know," Sirius stuttered, "I don't think I can do that. The Death Eaters..."

"Where's the Sirius Black of old?" Harry interrupted, "Where's the Sirius Black that jumped headfirst into situations that he didn't even begin to comprehend? Are you telling me that you're too scared to do this?"

"Scared?" Sirius stood up angrily, "No! I - just - I wouldn't know the first place to look. I'm - Harry you know this - I'm in no right state to go searching for Neville."

"There's no one else I can turn to. Trust me, I would have found someone else if I could."

Harry's sting made Sirius visibly wince for he knew how much the boy hated him.

"Harry," Sirius pleaded, "I can't..."

"What would my parents have you do?" Harry pulled out his trump card, "Would you forsake them even their death? Would you let them die for nothing because you couldn't go and find a sixteen-year old boy?"

Sirius paled, realizing that Harry was enforcing his guilt. The guilt that made Sirius drink so heavily that he forgot which way was North. The guilt that imprisoned him in his own home, a punishment for his idiocy and abandonment of his former best friend. He couldn't possibly let Harry down again. James and Lily made him Harry's godfather for a reason and Merlin be damned if he wasn't going to fulfill that purpose.

"I'll find him."

"You better hope so," the warning in Harry's voice evident, "Bring him back to me as soon as you do."

A week had passed since Neville's disappearance and Harry's subsequent visit to Sirius. There was no sign or word from the Marauder so far and Harry was beginning to suspect that locating Neville might prove a harder task than even he thought it would. Harry declined to tell the rest of the unit and especially Hermione about Sirius's involvement; it would only cause unneeded anxiousness on her part.

Hermione ranged from dismissively cold to hesitantly welcoming. Neville's sudden departure and the lack of caring on Harry's part constantly revolved her emotions. Harry sensed that despite her feelings for him, a small part of her wanted to follow Neville and, at the very least, make sure he was safe. Even when they were together, the tension was evident even in silence.

Currently, the unit was preparing to relieve Nott's unit in the hotbed of London. The areas surrounding the tower were infested with Death Eater camps and Mixers. As the war grew over the months, more and more Death Eaters surrounding the tower at Hyde Park until it became somewhat of a circle of death. All the units of the Minister's Army were wary of crossing that circle of death and generally stayed out of it's path.

"Why so serious, Harry?" Seamus asked as he fiddled with his wand.

"I'm not being serious," Harry gruffly replied as he re-checked his wand holster, flinching as he realized Seamus's unintended double entendre.

"You've been kind of a bummer lately. We can tell," Dean piled on.

"I'm completely fine," Harry rolled his eyes.

"I think I know what the problem is," Seamus sagely nodded, "Su Li. Padma. Out."

"Excuse me?" Padma asked, seemingly affronted.

"Guy business to talk about," Dean ushered them about, shushing their complaints.

Only Dean, Seamus, Michael, and Harry remained within the classroom. Malfoy was absent from the conversation. After making sure the door was shut and Padma and Su Li were out of earshot, Dean gave Seamus a thumbs up.

"Alright," Seamus clapped his hands together, "It's obvious you're in a bit of a rift with our very own Hermione Granger."

Harry groaned, "Please tell me we're not talking about this! We should be prepping for our leave."

"Pish-posh," Seamus waved his hand dismissively, "We might be in the middle of a war against a psychotic terrorist, but you have to remember - we're still sixteen and for once, we have a problem that is uniquely tuned for blooming younglings such as ourselves."

"Seamus is right," Michael nodded, "We have to find a way to get you out of your stupor."

"For the last time," Harry was growing impatient, "I'm not in a stupor."

"Then how come you and Hermione aren't attached at the hip? How come she ignores you for long periods of times? How come you two don't eat off each other's plates?" Seamus interrogated Harry.

"Because that's a disgusting show of public affection. I would never do that," Harry countered.

"Still - do you deny that you're in a bit of a squabble?"

Harry fidgeted, for one being the one under the pressure of everyone of else, "Okay - she's a bit mad at me. But can you blame me for sending Neville away? After what that bastard did..."

"No one's blaming you. Honestly, I'm a bit surprised you didn't kill the bloke right away," Seamus revealed.

"Would've been a good headline: Boy-Who-Lived attacks best friend and then is killed by psychotic boyfriend," Dean mimicked a newspaper headline with his hands.

"Boyfriend," Harry grumbled.

"You are her boyfriend, aren't you?" Michael suspiciously asked.

"I suppose - we didn't really put a label on it..."

"Harry, Harry," Seamus shook his head, "Did you not have a big, romantic moment? A date of some sorts where you asked for her hand?"

"I thought that was marriage?" Dean confusedly asked.

"Just a metaphor, Dean," Michael sighed.

"No," Harry frowned, "We didn't do any of that. She sort of kissed me and then I kissed her back. We haven't even had a date."

"Shocking romance," Seamus said in a dead-panned manner.

"It's not my fault!" Harry defended himself, "It's been a bit busy if you can't tell."

"Oh, I know. Death raining from the sky. Muggles going crazy - the usual," Seamus pulled out a parchment and started writing something.

"What's that?" Harry feared for he knew what Seamus was like when he got an idea.

"I -" Seamus smiled, "- am planning your first date with her."

"I don't think you should be in charge of that," Dean ribbed him, "I've seen what you do on dates."

"My resume speaks for itself," Seamus said in mock offense.

"Perhaps we should fine tune it to fit Harry and Hermione. Harry - what does Hermione like?" Michael intelligently cut in.

"Books."

"Reading."

"House Elves."

"Oh, Merlin - I forgot all about S.P.E.W," Seamus smacked himself in the head.

"It's a legitimate cause," Harry felt the need to defend her, "My family never had a house elf..." Harry trailed off at the sudden mention of his deceased parents.

Seamus coughed nervously and started speaking again to take Harry's attention away from that somber subject, "You may not have a label, but you sure act like her boyfriend."

Harry shook his head, "This is a bad idea. We shouldn't be planning dates. We have a job to do and we're leaving soon!"

"What Moody won't know won't hurt him," Dean said in a sing-song voice as he scribbled something on the parchment.

"Let me see that," Harry reached for the parchment.

"Nope!" Seamus yanked it back, away from his grasp, "And don't you use any of your fancy, mancy magic. Do you want to get back on Hermione's good side?"

"I suppose," Harry relented.

"Then leave us with our work. Between the three of us - well -" Seamus shot a look at Dean, "- the two of us will set you up with a perfect date."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"Look as dashing as possible."

Hermione was suspicious when Harry asked her to meet in the Herbology greenhouse.

On top of that, he also requested that she put on her best set of dress robes. Hermione was puzzled by the odd request; it was so unlike of Harry. Nevertheless, she donned a simple, blue dress with a halter top and a pair of robes she borrowed from a girl that still had the completely unnecessary clothing in her trunk. She attempted to fix her hair, but as usual, it refused to comply with her wishes so Hermione settled for tying it up in a messy bun. She stepped into the greenhouse and immediately realized that there were some...redecorations.

The desks and rows of plants had been cleared away and replaced with a single table and two chairs opposite from each other. Little, golden lights were interspersed through the vines that crisscrossed the roof of the greenhouse and the sides as well. Hermione swore that some of them were tiny fairies that swayed about since they seemed to majestically move in random patterns. Hermione half-expected a small orchestra to start playing music but was relieved to find Harry standing on the opposite side of the greenhouse.

He looked distinctly nervous but endearingly charming. He wore a simple button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows and plain, black slacks. His hair, untamable as always, seemed to at least complement his otherwise clean look. He smiled nervously at her when she finally spotted him.

"Harry," Hermione said slowly, "What's going on?"

"Um," Harry thrust a bouquet of flowers at her, "This is for you."

"Thank you?" She accepted the flowers with the same questioning look in her eyes.

"Here," Harry placed a hand on her back and led her to her seat, pulling it out for her and placing vanishing the flowers with one motion of his hand.

"Why did you get rid of the flowers?" Hermione demanded, feeling at a loss. Though she didn't quite know what was happening, she still appreciated the flowers nonetheless.

Harry faltered as if he realized what exactly he just did. Hermione could practically hear him hem and haw in his head and bit back a giggle at Harry's nervousness. Try as she might, she couldn't help



but feel sorry for Harry as he struggled to come up with a reasonable excuse.

"No place to put them," Harry hurriedly answered as he took a seat opposite to her and lighted the candle in the middle of their table.

Hermione simply raised an eyebrow at the mood setter.

"Ahem," Harry coughed loudly.

The doors of the greenhouse burst open and in strode Seamus, wearing a ridiculous tuxedo. Hermione shook her head but smiled to herself as she realized what exactly was being orchestrated.

"Good evening, beautiful people! Welcome to the Chez de Greenhouse. I will be your host for this evening. What would you two like to have tonight?" Seamus bowed extravagantly.

"Is there a menu?" Hermione played along.

"Why of course, mademoiselle," Seamus procured a menu from behind his back as if he expected the question. Handing it over to the couple, Seamus looked over Hermione's shoulder and pointed at an item.

"I would recommend that one!"

Hermione couldn't help but give a small laugh as she realized the three items on the menu: Dinner, Better Dinner, and Best Dinner. Seamus obviously pointed at Best Dinner.

"I'll have that one then!" Hermione cheerily replied.

"Same," said Harry.

Seamus collected the menus and left but not before slyly winking at Harry. Hermione caught the little interchange and looked at a blushing Harry.

"This can't possibly have been your idea, was it?" she asked him.

"Um -" Harry looked unsure as to how he should answer the question, "- yes it was..."

"Oh really?" Hermione bemusedly smiled, knowing that Harry couldn't have possibly thought of this, "I like the little lights. It's a good touch."

"Thanks, Mich - I mean - I thought they were...cute," Harry struggled with his words.

This time, Hermione couldn't help but giggle impishly at Harry's stuttering. It was as if he reverted back to the days when he was afraid to simply talk to her and engage her in flirtatious conversation. Harry blushed even redder, if possible, but smiled in relief.

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized, "I don't know what I'm doing. They convinced me into doing this. We can stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable."

"No," Hermione waved him off, "It's rather...nice. Very normal for a change."

"It is quite nice, isn't it?" Harry sheepishly admitted.

"Nice not to have Death Eaters breathing down your neck. Nice to just be eating dinner for a change."

"About that dinner..." Harry worriedly look at the door.

"I'm sure Seamus will cook up something just fine," Hermione reassured him.

"For both our sake's, let's hope so."

Hermione laughed again and Harry couldn't help but chuckle slightly. It felt surreal, sitting down to have a mock date with Hermione. Yet, it felt quite right. For once, there were no pressures, no dangers, nothing but the two of them.

As their chuckling died down, Harry fixed Hermione with a more serious look, "Are you still angry at me?"

Hermione's smile slipped off her face and she looked down and started fiddling with the end of her dress, "I'm not mad - I have no reason to be mad at you. I just have mixed feelings."

Harry stayed silent but nodded as if to say, "Go on."

"It's just - a part of me wants to go after Neville," Hermione professed, "It's the part of me that still cares about him, that wants to keep him safe. No matter what happened, he's still my best friend."

Harry, once again, remained taciturn, unwilling to share his emotions just yet.

"But the other part of me is...relieved. Relieved that I don't have to worry about Neville breaking down. Relieved that I'm with you and not in some tent wandering around the countryside. I just - I feel guilty thinking all these things when Neville's out there by himself," Hermione finished in a whisper.

"Maybe it's better for Neville to be alone right now. He'd be less likely to hurt anyone," Harry offered, not feeling too much sympathy for the other boy.

"No," Hermione shook her head, "He'll just get self-destructive by himself. He needs people to help him."

"He's going to be okay. Trust me on that. If anyone can do it, Neville can. His one determination in life is to beat Voldemort, that much I know," Harry reasoned.

"I know," Hermione nodded sadly, "It's all he thinks about it. I'm afraid it's going to consume him."

Harry couldn't comment on this fact as he had been dreaming about the very same thing ever since the Battle of Hogwarts. Yet, he was not burdened with the pressures of the prophecy or the constant mind attacks of Voldemort.

"He'll be okay. I've made sure of it," Harry said tightly.

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise and Harry could tell she was itching to ask a question. But for once, Hermione refrained and controlled her curiosity. Instead, she fixed him with an honest look of compassion.

"Even through all this..." Hermione whispered.

"Through what?" Harry asked, not understanding what she was referencing.

"Even after what Neville did, even after all the things that happened to you, you still find a way to make sure he doesn't get hurt," Hermione said in an astonished manner.

"It's just protocol," Harry muttered, embarrassed by the compliments.

Hermione smiled at him knowingly, "I'm sure it is. You're a good person, Harry. In the end, I hope you can realize that."

"You say it with such conviction."

"Because I know you are. Why do you think I like you so much?"

"I thought it was the glasses to be honest."

Hermione smiled, the kind of smile that bared her teeth and caused the corners of her eyes to crinkle, "I am a big fan of them. You look adorable."

"And here I thought I was intimidating," Harry exasperatedly sighed.

"You're both, strong and vulnerable at the same time," Hermione reached across the table to take Harry's hand in her own.

Harry squeezed her hand back gratefully, accepting her return. He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, memorizing the feeling. He picked up her hand and kissed the same knuckles softly. Hermione squeezed his hand back to show her appreciation.

"Durate et vosmet rebus servate secundis," Harry whispered softly.

Hermione beamed, instantly recognizing the saying.

"Better times, Harry. We'll both see to it."

Seamus knocked on Harry's door impatiently. They were supposed to leave at least half an hour ago but Harry was uncharacteristically late.

"Galleon says they did the deed," Dean bet.

"How are we defining the deed?" Michael asked, trying to establish the parameters of the bet.

"All the way, of course," Dean scoffed.

"Two Galleons says they didn't," Ron interjected, "I've known Hermione for longer than you."

"But do you know Hermione like Harry knows Hermione?" Dean wiggled his eyebrows.

Ron wrinkled his nose, "No and I would never wish to."

"Shhh!" Seamus shushed as he heard footsteps approaching the door.

The lock switched out of place and Hermione was greeted by Seamus, Dean, Michael, and Ron. She looked at them sternly, her lips set in a firm line.

"Harry said to double check your equipment and have everyone ready in five minutes. If you're not ready by then, we're leaving without you."

Seamus quirked the side of his lips, "It's hard to take you seriously when you're wearing his Quidditch shirt."

"Leave now!" Hermione snapped. As she closed the door though, they could all spot the smile that eventually cracked on her face.

"I believe you owe me two Galleons," Dean jabbed Ron in the chest as they retreated to Hogsmeade.

"Unluckily for you, I don't even remember the last time I've held a Galleon," Ron cheekily said.

Harry, indeed, arrived five minutes later, dressed in full attire. Hermione was with him and equally dressed and ready to embark on their mission. Although Harry's unit was designated to patrol and help against Death Eater forces, Ron and Hermione would be their

unofficial advisors. At least, that's what the official mission statement reported.

In reality, most of their time was going to be spent on finding the remaining Horcrux. Since owls were a useless form of communication now (too easily intercepted) and they had no other feasible way of contacting Neville, it was up to Hermione and Ron to solve the puzzle and find the last vestiges of Voldemort's soul.

"Everyone set?" Harry asked.

"Are you set?" Seamus slyly asked.

"What does that even mean?" Padma looked at Seamus as if he had been hit with one too many Stunners.

"I think young Seamus is trying to imply that Harry's in a good mood today," Dean translated.

"Why would Harry be in a better mood today?" Padma turned to Harry questioningly.

Harry fidgeted for a moment, but Hermione stepped in to intervene.

"Because we slept together," Hermione answered.

"What happened? Did Potter slip and find himself in between your legs?" Malfoy lazily drawled.

Ron snorted but then looked affronted as he realized who cracked the joke. Malfoy, with his half black/half white mask on, had a similar reaction and stepped away from Ron.

"I think I liked you better when no one knew who you were," Harry rolled his eyes, "Can we all be a bit mature and just leave?"

"How mature?" Seamus grinned perversely.

"Seamus! Leave them alone! Don't worry - you two - I'll get them to stop," Padma slapped Seamus's shoulder.

"Thank you, Padma," Hermione said gratefully.

The jibes and jokes, however, continued as they rode to London. Padma tried to cease the endless, harmless comments, but it was to no avail as Seamus and Dean were not going to be denied the opportunity to have a laugh. Harry and Hermione took it in stride though, for once not caring who knew about them. Though Ron was slightly uncomfortable at first, he even partook in the roast.

As they neared the outer circle of London, the group fell silent as the ominous sites of the formerly busy city dominated their view. The tower loomed in the air, a watchful sentry of all activities. At the base of the tower, smoke rose like blades of grass from the abandoned and shelled buildings. Even from a distance, signs of the Death Eaters were evident.

The stayed low in altitude, not wishing to attract any unneeded attention. Flying in a convoluted path, Harry led them through a complicated maze of buildings and side roads as they attempted to stay under the radar lest they attract any beastly dragons or excessive Mixers. They finally arrived at the rendezvous point that Seamus had set with Nott.

"Should be here soon," Seamus said as they established a safe parameter.

As if on cue, two low whistles could be heard as Harry's unit camped out in a building. Seamus whistled back once, a high, distinct shrill. A cloaked figure emerged, walking quickly to the front door of the marked building. The figure knocked on the door with three staccato bursts. Seamus approached the door, his wand in hand.

"Who's the biggest arse in the world?" Seamus asked.

"Potter, of course," Nott answered as he pulled back the hood of his cloak to reveal his face.

"I love that security question," Seamus grinned as he waved his wand and allowed Nott inside.

Nott rushed in, checking over his shoulder one more time to make sure he wasn't followed or was being watched. Nott nodded his head at the assembled crowd and raised an eyebrow at Hermione and Ron.

"I see you picked up some stragglers," Nott joked as he shook Harry's hand.

"Found them hitchhiking."

"Is that so?" Nott bemusedly and rhetorically asked, "Funny you should say so because I saw the third one the other day."

"You saw Neville?" Hermione rushed forward.

"When?" Harry asked in a business-like manner.

"Not three days ago if I remember correctly," Nott counted the days off his fingers, "Though he didn't seem particularly chuffed to see us. Declined our help. Is it safe for him to be wandering about alone?"

"You didn't stop him!" Hermione worriedly asked.

"As I said, he declined our help and ran away from us. I'm not going to go chasing after him. You may believe that Longbottom bullshit, but I certainly don't. I've been here -" Nott waved his arms around, "- for way too long to believe that Longbottom can defeat the Dark Lord."

"Still with the Dark Lord business?" Seamus interjected.

"Habit," Nott shrugged.

"Did he say where he was going? Where he was headed? Was there anyone with him?" Harry asked in a rush.

"Not particularly," Nott said as he looked at Harry in confusion, "No one was with him either. Is he not supposed to be wandering around London?"

"Not particularly safe for him," Seamus mused.

"Not my problem," Nott shrugged.

"Well - at least we know he's around here," Ron offered.

"Not exactly a good thing, Weasley," Nott shook his head, "The Dark Lord has been picking up his attacks against Muggles."



"Like what?"

Nott looked around the building and realized it was some sort of Muggle shop. He walked around until he found a telly to plug inside the outlet. Hoping that it still worked, Nott shoved the wire into the slot and turned on the television.

"Muggles may be primitive, archaic, and ugly, but these telly things are genius. Keeps us informed of the Death Eaters' whereabouts since they like to report attacks," Nott explained as he flipped through the channels.

Most of the channels were pure static since broadcasts were limited in the wake of the war. But there was one emergency channel that stayed active for the Muggles that could still find a television and the accompanying electricity.

"Ah, here it is," Nott stopped changing the channels as a picture of a Muggle reporter sitting behind a desk emerged.

Currently, the Muggle reporter was explaining different attacks in London. He was reading off an extensive list and it was obvious that this news station was not located inside the city area. He was in the middle of listing several escape routes and refugee camps when he suddenly stopped.

"Why'd he stop?" Ron asked, not used to the fascinating electronic.

"I don't know," Nott frowned, "That's unusual."

Hermione gasped as she watched a bright, green light blast the reported to the ground. There was a commotion that could be heard in the background then silence. After a few moments, a familiar figure stepped into view of the camera. It was surreal and Hermione had to blink several times, not believing what she was watching. Voldemort was on the telly.

Voldemort smiled, that eerie smile of his that could never been mistaken for happiness, "Hello, Muggle world. Many of you may not know me, but I am Lord Voldemort. I am the one responsible for the Dark Tower."

Voldemort stopped smiling, his face now murderously serious, "You may ask yourself what is this? What are these fantastical beasts that are suddenly popping out of nowhere? As if...by magic..."

"Who are these people who are brandishing wooden sticks and terrorizing your country? Why do they do this? Why do they torment us so?"

"We are wizards. We are a world that is kept hidden to you by those who fear our power. We are a world that has long been restrained by those who are foolish enough to think that our worlds could co-exist without one having knowledge of the other. I seek to break these barriers. I seek to join our worlds under one banner. Mines."

Voldemort turned, facing another camera, "But you still ask yourself, why are you doing this? Why are you hurting us? But I'm not hurting you! I'm reforming you. I am teaching you the ways of the most powerful wizards of our kind. There are forces that wish to defeat me, to send me back from whence I came. But I am simply here to show you that they can not defeat me. I am here to show you that I can help all of you. I can show you the ways of our world in a manner which you could never ever dream."

"I offer you the world. A world dominated by superior magical quality and by those who can grant you your every whim. I offer your heart's greatest desire. Resurrection? Riches? Immortality...I can offer you all of that. Things that your science have strived to achieve for centuries can be done with one snap of my fingers," Voldemort snapped his fingers and magically conjured what looked to be a wad of cash.

"Anything you want, you can have. Safety from other countries? Dominion and domination over the world? Come with me. For if you defy me..."

The camera suddenly swiveled and Hermione gasped as she spotted a battered Sergeant Thorn. He was sporting a few bruises and swayed on his legs but defiantly stared at Voldemort. An assault rifle was shuffled against the ground and tapped against his combat boots. Thorn looked at it hesitantly, unsure as to why they would present him with such an opportunity. With one quick glance at Voldemort, Thorn picked up his gun, switched the safety off and fired continuous rounds at Voldemort.

Voldemort didn't even have to move. He easily deflected the bullets and thrust his hand into the air in the shape of a choke grip. The gun flew out of Thorn's hands and landed in Voldemort's. He set the gun on fire and tossed it to the side. He retrieved his wand and summoned Thorn to him wordlessly. Thorn struggled to escape the magical pull but could do nothing about the spell. He lunged at Voldemort, but Voldemort simply twitched his wand and suspended Thorn in mid-air. Voldemort looked straight into the camera with a gleeful look on his face.

"You cannot stop me."

Voldemort slashed his wand in an upwards motion and Hermione had to turn away and duck her head into Harry's chest as Thorn's head was decapitated from his body. The blood spurted into the air and showered Voldemort's pale, gruesome skin. He sat back down, looking as calm as ever as he spoke to his audience once again.

"Do not defy me. It is of no use. But follow me and I will end the bloodshed and teach you our ways. Follow me and the world will be in your hand. All I ask is one thing and one thing only."

Voldemort suddenly summoned a picture to the camera and plastered it against the lens. Hermione's eyes widened as she realized who the picture was. There, moving in the portrait, was Neville Longbottom. It seemed to have been taken a year or so ago as Hermione recognized his hair back when the Tri-Wizard tournament started.

"This boy is important to me. He is dear to me in ways that he's yet to learn. He is missing and I need you to find him," Voldemort nodded sympathetically as if he cared for Neville, "His name is Neville Longbottom and if you find him. If you even see him, bring him to me and I will end this bloodshed immediately."

Voldemort leaned forward, his blood spattered face shining sickeningly in the studio lights, "Bring me Neville Longbottom and I will end this."

A/N: The Latin part translates to "Carry on and preserve yourself for better times." It's from the gift that Harry gave to Hermione in CH.12:

Releasing the Lever. Once again, hope you liked the chapter - I know there's a lot going on in it. Enjoy and leave one.

7 days before the ultimatum...

Neville kicked at the dirt impetuously as he wandered along the tracks.

He didn't know where he was exactly, the distance was undeterminable since he couldn't remember how far he had been walking. The tall peaks of Hogwarts and the dim glow of lights from Hogsmeade had long since disappeared from sight. At first, Neville was going to wander through the Forbidden Forest, but upon seeing a herd of centaurs slaughter some defenseless creature (the carcass was unidentifiable), Neville started following the train tracks of the now defunct Hogsmeade Express.

He was kicking a pebble along, imagining Harry's face as the target of the toe of his boots. The bruise from his punch still stung Neville's face, but Neville refused to treat it. It was a mark of Neville's weakness, his inability to hold Voldemort at bay. It was because of this incompetence that Neville left them. He couldn't stand keeping everyone in more danger than they already were.

Yet, Neville didn't quite realize how lonely it would be by himself. He kept reminding himself that it was for the greater good. It was for everyone else's benefit that he left. But he couldn't help but feel the bitter loneliness as his boots padded along the rusty rail tracks. He kept his head down, not wanting to see where he was headed for in truth, he didn't have the first clue as to where he was going.

It also didn't occur to him how vulnerable he was to be walking out in the open by a set of railroad tracks. Perhaps if he was in the right state of mind, he would have known that he was visible to almost anyone that happened to be flying over the particular area. For once his life, Neville was fortunate enough to avoid any sort of overhead detection - at least from wizards.

Muggles, on the other hand...

Neville didn't realize he was walking along some sort of paved roadway until he heard the soft hum of an engine. He alertly threw himself into a row of bushes, muttering a concealment charm in the process. The searching beams of the headlights peeked over the crest of the hill. It was some sort of old, creaky car. The engine rumbled loudly which contrasted the rather feminine pink of the

antique car. Neville couldn't make out the number of passengers in the car since the headlights blinded his vision. It was only dusk but it was dark enough to limit his view.

The car suddenly stopped and the headlights switched off, not more than twenty meters from Neville's spot. For a moment, he feared that the passengers had spotted them but reminded himself that he had long been concealed even before the car crested the hill. All four doors snapped open and out stepped what looked to be a normal four-person Muggle family.

The father was a tall, thin, balding man with thick glasses. He walked around to the front of the car and propped the hood, inspecting it with a harried look about him. The mother was an equally thin woman but was shorter. She was attending to what looked to be a younger son and her teenage daughter. Feeling curious, Neville crept out, still hidden, so he could get closer to the Muggle family.

"...I told you we wouldn't be able to make it back to Sussex with this car! It's rubbish now!" the wife said to the husband.

"Now calm down, this car's been through a lot and it's not going to give up on us now. It just needs a little something..." the husband seemed to hit something under the car's hood with his hand.

"Jamie, are you hungry, love?" the mother asked the son.

"No, mum," Jamie said sullenly.

"It's okay, dear," she stroked his cheek gently, "We're almost back with your uncle and we all know how uncle loves his food."

"Maybe he wouldn't be so fat if he loved it a bit less," the daughter interjected.

The mother sighed, "Well, for once his gluttony will help us out a bit. He has enough food stored up in his house to feed an entire country."

"If he even let's us in," the daughter said darkly.

"He'll let us in, Cheryl, he's family," the mother reprimanded her.

"He's a pig, mum," Cheryl responded.

"He sort of looks like a pig!" Jamie added, his sullenness broken a bit by his comment.

The mother couldn't help but chuckle slightly, "I know what you mean."

"Oi! Don't think I can't hear you talking about my brother!" the father yelled from his spot under the hood.

"It's okay, Wayne, they're just a bit cranky," the mother winked at her children.

"Well, Colleen, they shouldn't be cranky because I fixed the car!" Wayne excitedly raced around to the driver's seat and yelped as the engine started, "We're back in business!"

Thinking on the fly, Neville cancelled the concealment charm. Charming his duffel bag so that it was set to only open for him, Neville stowed his wand and carefully walked into the path of the road as if he were lost. The family easily caught sight of him and froze, unsure as of how to react to the stranger.

Neville play faked that he didn't know the car was there and shielded his eyes slightly from the bright headlights. He stepped forward with his hands in the air, trying to claim his innocence.

"Hello! Is anybody there?" Neville called out.

Neville could see Wayne and Colleen furiously whispering to each other and gesturing to him. Cheryl was shielding Jamie from Neville, aware of the dangers presented by strangers such as the wizard-they-knew-not. After a few more moments of hushed arguing, Wayne straightened and stuck his head out of the car.

"I'm sorry! We're full in here!" Wayne called out.

"Oh," Neville dropped his head, "It's okay, I understand."

Neville started shuffling his feet, walking as if he were going to head out into the next green clearing. He knew he was being pitiful but

honestly, he was desperate to return back to the London area. It also wouldn't hurt to have some company, even if it was a family of Muggles. After a few moments, Neville could hear the car come rolling to a stop next to him.

"Young man!" Colleen called out, "I think we can make a bit of space for you."

It was obvious that Colleen was the one who pitied Neville and decided to take in the boy. She looked at him warily but at the same time invitingly, a mixture of apprehension and pity. Neville squeezed into the three-passenger back seat, sitting next to Jamie. Cheryl had both of her arms wrapped around her little brother, not meeting Neville's eyes and looking straight ahead instead.

Neville coughed to clear his throat, "Thanks for taking me in. I've been wandering about for a while and needed a way to get back to the London area."

"Why were you alone?" Wayne asked suspiciously, eyeing Neville through the rearview mirror as he started the car again.

"I lost my friends recently," Neville wasn't telling an outright lie. It felt as if he had lost all his friends.

"I'm sorry," Colleen simply replied, implicitly excusing Wayne's rudeness, "What are you heading to London for? Shouldn't you be trying to get away? I've heard the attacks are just getting worse..."

"There's someone that can help me there."

"Family?"

"Not exactly," Neville left it at that, making it clear that he didn't want to talk about it anymore. Wayne's eyes snapped to the rearview mirror at the sudden secrecy, but Neville wasn't about to share his deepest darkest secrets with a few Muggles.

They drove in silence for a little while, Wayne constantly peeking at Neville through the rearview mirror. Neville did his best to ignore the suspicious glances and kept his eyes glued to the barren countryside. It was largely devoid of any activity, even when they drove by small towns. Once or twice, Neville thought he spotted a



shimmer of magic in the distance and gripped the seat tightly, hoping that the worse wouldn't appear out of the blue.

"What's your name?" Jamie suddenly asked, looking at Neville curiously.

Neville watched as Cheryl tightened her arms around Jamie but nonetheless replied, "I'm Neville."

He figured that his name wouldn't be too popular amongst the Muggle crowd.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Jamie and this is Cheryl," Jamie innocently pointed at his sister. Cheryl shushed him, fearful that Neville was of malicious intent, but Neville just smiled at the young boy.

"Nice to meet you, Jamie. Want to see something cool?"

"Sure!"

Neville lifted the fringe of his hair to reveal his famous lightning-shaped scar. He pointed to it and said, "I got this scar when I was baby. My parents dropped me and left me with this scar. I remember crying a lot, but doesn't it look pretty cool?"

"It looks like a lightning bolt," Jamie stared at it amusedly.

"Yes it does. It's kind of my thing," Neville smiled at the little boy again, feeling a connection with him.

"What could your parents have possibly dropped you on?" Cheryl said with her nose scrunched.

"Don't remember," Neville fibbed.

"I think it's cool," Jamie added.

"Jamie, don't make fun of people's scars," Colleen reprimanded him from the front seat.

"Oh - don't worry. I'm kind of famous for it," Neville winked at Jamie and caused the little boy to giggle behind his mother's back.

Colleen heard the small chuckle of her soon and smiled to herself. It had been a while since there was something to smile about. She had a good feeling about this boy, despite the dangers of taking a strange hitchhiker in this sort of climate. Still, he had a good aura about him and Colleen firmly believed in those sorts of things.

Wayne, on the other hand, was still apprehensive but it was simply his protective nature. Ever since the tower rose, one never knew who to trust and his family was only one step away from being attacked by those...things.

Neville kept joking with Jamie and entertaining him with fantastical tales about his make believe Muggle school. He told Jamie of his two friends, Bill and Jane and how they always did everything together. He explained their slimy chemistry professor and their amusing mathematics professor. Neville continued to weave the tale to and fro, for once enjoying the prospect of not living his life.

Neville fabricated the story into deeper and deeper levels, thoroughly enjoying himself. He could even spot Cheryl smile a little bit at some of his more amusing anecdotes. He caught her eye a couple times and smiled, noting that she was indeed very pretty. She had long, curly brown hair and delightful almond eyes. Even though her face was constantly set in a serious stone, Neville could see that she had to restrain from smiling at him as he continued to tell the Muggle version of his life story, obviously omitting the more ominous parts.

"So what happened in the third task?" Jamie eagerly asked.

"Well, Charles and I decided to take the trophy together so that we both win and we did just that," Neville revealed the alternate ending.

"Yay! Everyone wins!" Jamie clapped.

"Quite an interesting school you went to," Cheryl noted, "What was it called again?"

"Hoggington," Neville made the name up on the spot, "Private school in Scotland."

"You must be pretty well off then. What do your parents do?" Cheryl asked noisily.

"Um - my parents are dead. I'm on scholarship to the school," Neville half-lied.

"Oh," Cheryl looked properly chastised and the glare from her mother only confirmed it, "Sorry to hear that."

"They died when I was young," Neville shrugged, "It's okay."

They fell into an uncomfortable silence after that, Jamie half-heartedly asking questions about Neville's life. Neville continued to entertain the little boy with a couple of stories but his voice trailed off as he caught sight of the towering pillars of smoke and ash in the London skyline.

"We should stop here and find a place to stay for the night," Wayne's face was dark as he examined the dark skyline.

Neville suddenly recognized an abandoned building that he, Ron and Hermione used while they were on the run. He cleared his throat and pointed to it as they drove closer to the granite building.

"If you pull over here, I think I know a spot."

"You think you know a spot?" Wayne skeptically asked.

"My friends and I used it not too long ago," Neville admitted.

Wayne hesitated but eventually pulled the car into an alleyway between one building and another. Neville hopped out and did a quick sweep of the area. He was used to clearing out a space to safely live in since he had previously been on the run for a while. After determining there were no Death Eaters around, Neville found the room that Hermione had picked out for them. It was a good size for a family of four and provided enough exits should a stray Mixer or violent Muggle find them.

After he showed the family the empty room, Neville discretely went around and erected safety wards with his wand. He tuned it so the family wouldn't notice any sudden magical changes. After checking

and rechecking several times, Neville was finally satisfied and returned to the room. He spotted Jamie eating a loaf of bread with some sort of butter spread. Feeling sorry for the child, Neville reached into his duffel bag and pulled out a chocolate truffle he knicked from the kitchens before he left.

"Here you go," Neville said.

Jamie salivated at the sight and took it appreciatively, downing it in quick bites. Colleen smiled gratefully at him, feeling more and more sure that they had made the right decision in taking in the boy. They continued to get settled as the night grew darker and darker until only the moon was shining high in the sky. Jamie was long asleep, his head laying in his sister's lap.

Satisfied that Jamie was finally slumbering, Wayne turned to interrogate Neville more truthfully, "So what's your real story, lad? It's not that safe for a young man such as yourself to be wandering the countryside in times like these."

"My friends and I got separated from our families during the beginning of the War - I mean, the tower. It was sort of hectic at the time and my two friends and I have been on the run ever since. I recently...got separated from them," Neville started slowly, unsure as to how much he should reveal. In the end, he delivered a mostly truthful version of his story.

"So you're coming back to London to find them?" Colleen asked.

"No," Neville bowed his head, "I'm afraid I have no clue as to where they are."

"I'm so sorry," Colleen held a hand to her heart.

"So am I."

"So what is in London then?" asked Cheryl, the ever inquisitive one.

"I think there's someone there that can help me."

This was a total lie. Neville was looking for a Horcrux but didn't know what it even was. Considering the fact that Dumbledore's memories had Voldemort working at Borgin and Burke's, it wouldn't hurt to

revisit that store for a start. But Neville couldn't possibly explain any of that to them.

"I'm sorry if we didn't take you in right away," Wayne apologized, "You have to understand. We were just looking out for our kids."

"It's okay," Neville placated them, "I'd do the same - if I had kids I mean. Jamie's a good one."

"He's our little angel," Colleen smiled warmly at the sleeping boy.

"Where are you headed to?" Neville changed the subject so no more questions were asked about him.

"My brother's still living in his house. We tried to leave England but it was too dangerous to go near the airports," Wayne trailed off as if he were remembering a harsh time, "Last time I talked to him, they were sealing up their house and collecting rations for themselves. Hopefully, they're still there."

"I see."

The story was consistent with most Muggles nowadays. Unable to leave the island and fearful of the strange seemingly magical people, the Muggles kept to themselves and simply hoped that an attack wouldn't suddenly befall them. Neville couldn't possibly imagine the helplessness they felt.

"Well, thank you for taking me in. I know it took a lot to trust me to stay with you."

"And don't you go doing anything that might prove us otherwise," Colleen was wagging her finger at Neville but the smile belied a lighter tone in her voice.

"Trust me, I won't."

5 days before the ultimatum...

They spent an extra day at the abandoned building as they had heard multiple scuffles and noises in the near distance. Neville went out to check but found only trace of a battle between Muggle soldiers and Mixers. Not wanting to bring any trouble to the family,

Neville hastily fled the scene and advised them to stay for another day. After a relatively uneventful night, they set out to the Sussex area once again.

It seemed contradictory to travel by day when you were most visible but from personal experience, Neville discovered that the Death Eaters somehow attacked less in the daytime. Maybe they just wanted to be dramatic and attack in the night, but for the most part, traveling by day was a safer exercise than trying to navigate the road by night.

Unfortunately, they would have to travel through London in order to exit on the other side of the city. Neville knew first hand that things could get ugly fast and kept his wand tightly pinned to his side, fearful of any sudden attacks. Wayne, even though he didn't quite understand magic, seemed to realize Neville's tenseness and drove with white knuckles on the steering wheel.

Neville felt the car shudder a few times, the vibrations from the ground reminiscent of either a giant or a troll. His heart pounded as he kept his hand within his jacket, a deathly grip on his wand. Wayne kept driving, occasionally seeing a haggardly looking person peeking out from a window or two. Once or twice, a few Mixers (and they knew it was a mixer since they wore the appropriate garb) looked like they were entertaining the idea of stopping the car from going far. Fortunately, they seemed to have a different problem or something else higher in their priorities. They escaped to the other side of London without much more hubbub.

Neville knew that he could have easily left the car in London and proceeded to Borkin's on his own but a part of him wanted to stay with this family. Even though he had only been with them for two days, he felt a connection to them and didn't want to leave them to their own fortunes. His protectiveness over them kept him in the car as they exited London.

As they continued driving, Wayne suddenly cursed to himself, "Dammit, I think I read it wrong."

"Read what wrong?" Colleen asked in concern.

"The address," Wayne was reading a smudged piece of writing on a small paper, "I think we're supposed to head to Surrey not Sussex."

"That's not too far of a detour," Colleen assuaged him.

"No - not really," Wayne exhaled, "We should get there by nightfall."

Neville noted the little detail and leaned his head against the window and stared at the sky. Dark clouds loomed along the horizon. A thunderstorm was headed their way and Neville hoped that they could somehow avoid driving in such a maelstrom. The sun started setting in the sky as they drove, unperturbed, to Surrey. In truth, Neville was surprised by the simplicity of their travel. Here they were, driving on the main streets of England and no one was even trying to stop them. Of course, Neville spotted a couple of other cars zipping along the highway as well but for the most part, Wayne seemed to know several back roads that avoided the main streets.

The sun was setting as Wayne pulled into a series of similar looking houses. For all their monotony though, the dense overgrowth of their lawns were indicators of the lack of inhabitants in the previously quaint town. The first drops of rain slapped against the windshield, causing Neville to pull back from the cool glass. The rain started slow but was picking up by the second. Wayne suddenly pulled into a driveway and killed the engine. The only sound was the pitter patter of the rain smashing against the car.

"Number Four Privet Drive," Wayne read, "This is the place."

The first thing Neville noticed was that every window was boarded up, not allowing anyone to see in or out of it from his vantage point. The lawn was similarly overgrown but Neville spotted creases in the grass and broken twigs as if something heavy had been dragged over it. From the outside, it looked wholly unoccupied and as if no one had lived there in quite a while. Cheryl evidently had similar thoughts.

"It looks empty," she said.

"Brother did say they were having second thoughts about boarding up in here," Wayne whispered, still sitting in the driver's seat.

"I'll check it," Neville said as he unbuckled his seat belt, "You can stay in the car."

"Neville, you don't have to do that -" Colleen started.

"No it's okay," Neville interrupted, "My friends and I used to check out buildings to see if they were safe. I've done this numerous times."

Neville wrapped his jacket tightly around him as he exited the car and warily approached the house. He kept his eyes as open as he could through the steady stream of rain. There seemed to be no movement and a complete lack of magical atmosphere. Neville could usually feel the touch of magic, it was too evident not to feel if you were a wizard, but there seemed to be a complete absence of anything magical within the premises. At least Neville could take solace in the fact that he could more easily face a trap of Mixers than a trap of Death Eaters.

Neville circled the house, checking to see if there were any other entrances. There seemed to be a back door in the backyard but it was sealed shut with cement filling the edges of the door. Neville hesitantly tried an Alohamora on the door but it didn't move, indicating there was neither a doorknob nor hinges that could be undone. Not wanting to use force unless necessary, Neville circled around the front and looked at the front door. There was only one way to find out if someone was inside.

He knocked three times, crisp and loud in case anyone couldn't hear it. Then, he stood to the side with his hand tucked in his jacket. He listened closely to footsteps and was awarded when he heard the steady thump of someone heavy approaching the door. The footsteps stopped and Neville knew that whoever was inside was standing on the other side of the door.

A gruff voice suddenly spoke out, "Who's there?"

Neville took a moment to consider his options before replying, "It's a friend of your brother - Wayne!"

There was a pause before the voice spoke out again, "If you're his friend then where is he? Where's Wayne?"

Neville, still out of sight from the peephole at the front door, signaled for Wayne to get out of the car. Wayne exited and jogged towards



the door, his head kept low to avoid the rain. He walked up the steps and was in clear view of the peephole.

"Vernon!" Wayne called out, "It's me!"

"Prove it!" Vernon barked.

"Prove it? Vernon, don't be ridiculous! Can't you see me!"

"I'm not going to believe you until you tell me something that proves you're Wayne! I know what you crazy fools can do!" Vernon yelled.

"Vernon," Wayne sighed exasperatedly, "When you were little, your favorite toys were a bulldozer and a drill that Mum gave us when we were about five. You hit me when I accidentally broke the bulldozer."

There was a pause before Neville heard several latches unlocking from within. The door opened and Neville finally saw this Vernon character. He was a large man, there was no doubt of that. He had a bushy mustache and small, beady eyes that gave him the look of a person in perpetual anger. But for right now, there were tears in his eyes as he regarded his brother. Dropping the shotgun held in his hand, he wrapped his arms around Wayne in a big hug.

Wayne returned the hug and pulled back, "It's good to see you still clicking, Vernon."

"We do what we can," Vernon gruffly said. He spotted Neville leaning against the side of the house and regarded him coolly, "Family?"

"Friend," Neville stepped forward with his hand outstretched, "Neville."

Vernon begrudgingly shook his hand, looking at it warily before turning to his brother, "Are Colleen and the kids with you?"

"Yeah," Wayne gave the thumbs up to his car to indicate that the coast was clear. Colleen and the kids immediately rushed out and gathered what belongings they had as they jogged through the rain and into the front porch of the house. Pleasantries were exchanged as Colleen profusely thanked Vernon for taking them into their

house. Neville followed everyone inside and was immediately arrested by how normal everything looked inside.

The house was immaculately clean, from the perfect arrangement in the living room to the spotless kitchen. If it wasn't for the fact that Vernon was walking around carrying a shotgun, Neville would have suspected that nothing was amiss at Number Four Privet Drive. It was only when Vernon led them to a hidden door that led to a basement did Neville finally see the effects of the War.

In the basement, there were stores and stores of food packing and lining the walls. A generator hummed in the corner, no doubt providing electricity to the house. Off to the side was a small armory with assorted handguns and rifles. It looked hardly used though Neville could see a spot on the wall that fit Vernon's shotgun. Vernon whistled loudly and another door opened from within the basement.

Out stepped his apparent wife and child. His wife, in contrast to her husband's beefy body, was thin to the bone and had a horse face. She looked incredibly strict and nervous as she nodded to Wayne and his family. The son, who eerily resembled his father, looked just as nervous but slightly more appreciative of their new companions.

"Errr," Vernon stuttered as he remembered Neville didn't know the family, "Neville, this is my wife, Petunia, and my son, Dudley."

Neville quietly murmured hello as he didn't want to scare the family away. They looked nervous enough as it was. There was an awkward silence as no one knew what to say. What could one say in a time like this? Surprisingly, it was Petunia who broke the ice.

"Colleen, do you want to help me set up dinner?" Petunia timidly asked.

"That would be lovely," Colleen exhaled.

The husbands soon followed them upstairs and left the three teenagers and one child to their own devices. They looked at each other with questioning looks on their faces, all thinking the same thing. It was Cheryl who relayed their feelings.

"So...what now?"

4 days before the ultimatum...

Dinner from the previous night was a pleasant if not a bit forced affair. The adults exchanged small talk as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Neville was just grateful for food that wasn't kept in his duffel bag for once. When everyone was about to go to sleep, Neville was surprised to see Vernon accompany him to the living room. Vernon didn't strike Neville as a particularly caring individual, but apparently, Vernon slept every night in the living room with his shotgun close at hand in case someone broke through the front door. The front door was the only way in and out of the house and was dead-bolted several times over, ensuring their safety as much as it could.

With the rest of the kids still asleep, Neville was sitting in the kitchen, idly eating some leftovers from the night before. In walked Vernon and Wayne, discussing something in low, huddled overtones. Wayne greeted Neville warmly as he took a seat across from him at the table while Vernon grunted his hello. They ate for a little while, murmuring to themselves quietly.

Vernon cleared his throat and looked at Neville, "We have to go out for more supplies now that there are a couple more people here. Are you up for the task, boy?"

"Yes, sir," Neville simply replied, biting his cheek to keep the sardonic smile from breaking out in his face.

"Good," Vernon said gruffly, "We leave in ten."

Neville quickly munched the rest of his food in one gulp and set off to his duffel bag to collect equipment. He wouldn't need much besides his wand if they were trying to collect food but it didn't hurt to stay prepared. He heard Wayne call out his name and rushed back up the stairs to the front door. Vernon was leaving strict instructions for Petunia in case they took a bit longer to come back. Neville ducked as he witnessed a tender moment between the fat man and the thin lady but was thankfully saved by Cheryl tapping him on the shoulder.

"Are you going with them?" she asked him.

"I suppose I am," Neville shrugged.

Cheryl hesitated for a second before smacking him in the shoulder, "Come back, okay? Jamie will miss you if you don't."

"I'll make sure to do my best," Neville grinned at her.

Vernon called for Neville once again and the three males strode out the door to retrieve the food. Vernon, as usual, was carrying his shotgun in his hand while Wayne looked decidedly uncomfortable with a small handgun. Vernon surprised Neville by offering him a pistol as well. Neville took it but had no intention of using it whatsoever. It was definitely more harm than good in his hands.

They took Wayne's car out to a local grocery that Vernon had been using to replenish their supplies. Vernon had already raided many of the other stores by himself and it was only a matter of time before he would have to venture further and further away from home to retrieve supplies. For now though, whatever was available at the super market would have to do.

They arrived at the rather dilapidated store. Some of the windows were broken and litter was scattered throughout the parking lot but there seemed to be no one around. The only sound was the occasional metal can skittering along the ground. Wayne looked incredibly nervous as he exited the car, no doubt to the gun he held in his hand. Vernon looked more authoritative but worried nonetheless.

"Get what you can, but don't take too long. If you run into trouble, give a shout," Vernon ordered them.

They decided to ostensibly split up in order to get as much food as possible. Vernon reminded them to go after perishable items since most of the refrigerated items here were already rotten from the refrigerators dying. Neville could smell the aftermath of the rotten meats and avoided that section of the store. He settled with idly picking up other items as he strolled casually through the store.

It struck Neville that there were a surprising amount of items readily available for him to harvest and gather. He thought that most people would have already taken all the foods and goods months ago but for some reason there were still items to collect. It never occurred to

him why exactly Vernon brought a shotgun until he heard the shot ring out.

The small pop told Neville that it couldn't have been Vernon. The fact that there was only one shot worried Neville as he hurriedly raced across the store towards the noise's origin. He turned the corner just in time to see a body on the ground, blood pooling around him. Wayne stood over him in shock, his gun still pointed at him.

"What happened?" Neville demanded.

Vernon barreled around the aisle, huffing heavily and his shotgun ready in hand, "Wayne?"

"I - I - I - he surprised me!" Wayne stuttered, his eyes wide as he looked at the body lying on the ground.

Vernon kneeled down and placed his pudgy fingers on the carotid artery, "Dead."

"He just came around the corner and surprised me and I just couldn't - he came too fast!" Wayne kept blabbing, still frozen.

"Mixer," Neville assessed gravely as he spotted the telling tattoo on the inside of his forearm, "People will have heard that."

"Too true," Vernon said gruffly.

"What was he doing here?" Wayne bewilderedly asked, still in shock from having shot someone.

"They send patrols out here sometimes to see if anyone's in the stores. That's why there's still food on the shelves. It's bait essentially," Vernon informed him as they rushed out of the store with whatever food they had.

"So you essentially lead us into a trap?"

"I gave you the gun didn't I?" Vernon snarled.

Neville suddenly heard several distinct pops. He couldn't mistake the noise even if he tried. There were the sounds of numerous people Apparating.

"We have trouble," Neville informed them, handing Vernon the pistol and reaching into his jacket for his wand.

"Trouble? Why are you giving me this?" Vernon asked as he held the pistol in his hand.

"Won't need it," Neville whispered as he indicated for the two older men to hide behind an overturned metal casing.

Holding a hand to his lips to shush the two Muggles, Neville saw his theory come to fruition as he spotted three men under hooded cloaks walking towards the dead Mixer. Neville spotted their wands in their hands and apparently Wayne and Vernon knew enough about wizards to know who they were. Vernon gripped the shotgun tight in his hand, his eyes impossibly narrowing even further.

Neville knew he could take the three of them by surprise easily. The only problem was that in order to do so, he would have to reveal to Wayne and Vernon that he was indeed a wizard. While he didn't have any qualms of doing so, he was fearful that Vernon would somehow associate his brother with him and kick him out of their safe house just because they harbored a wizard. The look on Vernon's face was all Neville needed to realize how much the fat man hated magic.

"Listen," Neville said as he formulated his plan, "You two can still get away while I provide a distraction. Come back for me when you can."

"No! We can't let you do that! We'll all get out of here together," Wayne shakily said though Neville did note that Vernon certainly didn't object to the plan.

"You both have families that you need to get back to. I don't have anyone," Neville did his best to keep the bitterness out of his voice, "Just go and come back for me. I promise I'll still be here."

Wayne hesitated again as he remembered his wife and children. Vernon had already made his decision and tugged on his brother's arm, "We'll come back for the boy, I promise."

Wayne looked up at his brother and nodded numbly, "Stay safe, Neville. I promise we'll come back for you."

"I know you will."

Vernon and Wayne slinked away - well, Wayne slinked away while Vernon lumbered as best as he could on his tiptoes. Once they were safely away from the aisle, Neville turned his attention to the three wizards still inspecting the dead mixer. Neville couldn't see their faces so he didn't know what exactly they were capable of but it didn't hurt to be safe.

He pulled out one of his last flasks of Peruvian darkness in order to ensure he completed the task. Ordinarily, the powder was used as a distraction to escape from one's chasers, but Neville could also use it to disorient the wizards and take them down without them ever seeing him.

He hurdled over the metal casing and rushed to them with the powder in hand. He quickly threw the powder over the trio of wizards, shrouding them in darkness. They yelled in confusion and Neville quickly hit two of them with well placed Stunners. He would need the third one capable of speech and completely oriented. One Expelliarmus and one Incarcerous later, the third wizard was bound on the ground and without his wand.

Neville rushed to him and placed his hands over the wizard's eyes so the Death Eater wouldn't now who he was. He lowered his voice a pitch, using a bit of his Parseltongue to inflect a more sinister tone.

"What are you doing here?" Neville hissed in English.

"What? Who are you? What is this?" the Death Eater yelled.

Neville jabbed his wand into the man's throat and ordered again, "Why are you here?"

The Death Eater choked and stuttered, "Just a fucking patrol. That's what happens when Mixers used for bait suddenly die."

"And nothing else? You haven't seen anything?" Neville wanted to make sure they didn't know about Vernon or Wayne.

"Fucking no," the Death Eater sputtered.

"Good," Neville stunned him a second later and stood over the three bodies, slightly admiring his body of work.

He pondered for a second what he should do with the three prisoners. On one hand, he could let them live as he would have plenty of time to escape back to Privet Drive. If he let them live, however, they would certainly make note of wizard activity in the area and possibly lead them back to Number Four. He wasn't as handy as Hermione with Obliviation charms so he didn't quite know how well it would work.

In the end, Neville settled with keeping them bound and gagged and attempting a variation of the memory charm. He hoped he performed the charm correctly but really had no idea of discovering if it worked. Not wanting to wake the wizards and have them realize who he was, Neville left them to their own devices, queasy of actually entertaining the prospect of...killing them.

He exited the market and started walking back to Privet Drive, wary of any trouble that might occur. Fortunately, he spotted the impossible to miss pink car driving back in the direction of the market. Neville rushed to it with his arms raised, grateful to see that they indeed came back. He piled into the back seat, thankful that they kept their promise.

"You got away!" Wayne exclaimed.

"Yeah. Distracted them long enough but somehow found a way to escape them," Neville smoothly lied, "We should be alright."

"Did you take care of them?" Vernon asked.

"Of course."

"No - I mean, take care of them?" Vernon repeated.

"I don't follow," Neville frowned.



Vernon shifted in his seat, a feat that was difficult for a man in his size. He looked at Wayne and Neville uncomfortably before saying, "Did you kill them?"

"Vernon!" Wayne exclaimed, "Kill them?"

"How do you think they've avoided this area all this time? You take care of them and make sure they don't tell their friends and they leave this area alone! It's worked so far!"

"Or they could just keep going after you!" Wayne shot back, "Either way, you can't just keep killing everyone!"

"It's worked so far," Vernon kept arguing, his face now turning purple, "I won't have you jeopardizing my family, Wayne."

"My family is here too," Wayne reminded him, "We can't just kill everyone."

"I didn't kill them," Neville said quietly.

"Of course you didn't," Vernon huffed, "Never send a boy to do a man's job..."

"Vernon!" Wayne was shocked at his brother's behavior, "He almost sacrificed himself to save us."

"Then he should have finished the job!" Vernon spit out, "They could follow us back here for all we know."

And apparently, Vernon was correct.

They were not a mile from Number Four, but Neville could easily spot the three blurs flying in the sky straight towards the pink car. Wayne and Vernon were still arguing but Neville already had his wand out.

"Protego!"

Neville managed to deflect the Blasting curse as it splintered against the shield and struck the ground on either side of the car. It shook

the already creaking car and Wayne yelped as he realized that something was definitely amiss.

"What the fu..." Vernon trailed off as he stared at the wand in Neville's hand.

"No time," Neville grunted his explanation as he shot a spell in the sky at the flying wizard.

Neville never excelled at combat in flight, perhaps due to his ineffectiveness on a broom, and was no better at shooting down flying targets from the ground. His spells were wayward and off target but Wayne was maneuvering the car to avoid the random blasting and cursing hexes. Vernon, for his part, was angrily shooting his shotgun into the air but it seemed to have no effect on the wizards.

"I knew you were trouble!" Vernon yelled as another Blasting curse struck the ground next to the car.

"I was just trying to help!" Neville yelled back as he twisted his body and finally struck one of the wizards.

Vernon couldn't rebuttal as a curse finally struck the car and caused it to spin out of the control. Neville held on tight to his seat belt, the G-forces pulling him to and fro as the car struck a curb and flipped into the air, barreling several times. Neville hastily cast a Cushioning Charm, hoping for the best. They clattered against the car, but Neville felt his charm hit work as his head bounced off the metal interior.

Wayne and Vernon were groaning as they attempted to get out of the car. Neville was faster and scrambled outside to defend against the aerial assault. Once again, Neville's aim failed him as he missed time and time again. The Death Eaters were circling around him as if they were a vulture and he was their soon to be dead carcass. Neville managed to avoid a nasty looking purple curse and only raised a shield just in time to deflect another curse.

"Stupid fucking magic," Vernon growled as he army crawled out of the car and shot a few shells into the air in futility.

"Vernon, stay inside!" Neville ordered as he redirected a hex sent to the Muggle man.

"Fuck you," Vernon spit, "You brought this onto us!"

"I might have, but GET BACK IN THE CAR!" Neville couldn't care for anything else at the moment.

Distracted by Vernon, Neville didn't see the Disarming charm from behind him. It hit him in the back and he felt his wand fly through the air and land twenty feet in front of him. Panicking, he started to scramble for his wand and didn't see the Blasting charm aimed at his feet. It hit the ground next to him, sending him end over end in the air and forcing him to land on his back, knocking the air out of him.

Neville distinctly heard the yells of Wayne and Vernon as the Death Eaters touched down on the ground but was too dazed to do anything about it. He was crawling to his wand, desperate to reach it in order to do something about the Death Eaters. He was still crawling when a Death Eater suddenly cut him off, standing before him with his sinister mask in place.

The Death Eater raised his wand, not a Killing Curse on his lips, but something else to give Neville to his master. As he started the downwards slashing motion, however, the Death Eater suddenly burst apart in a massive shower of blood and guts. There was a gaping hole where his chest was and the Death Eater looked shocked to have been hit by a mere Muggle weapon. Behind Neville, Vernon Dursley was on his feet, shotgun in his hand and an irreversibly contemptuous look in his eyes.

The two other Death Eaters were momentarily shocked and the slight pause allowed Neville to crawl the final few feet and reach his wand. Now that the Death Eaters were on the ground, he dispatched them easily as they were still in shock from their fellow Death Eater's dismemberment.

Neville collapsed against the ground, his energy spent and his limbs sore and tired from the attacks. He felt a sudden panic as someone placed a boot against his chest. It didn't occur to him that it was Vernon who was standing over him, the gun straight in his face.

"Vernon? What are you doing?" Wayne asked.

"What am I doing?" Vernon said with a maniac look on his face, "What are you doing? Did you know he was one of them, Wayne? Did YOU?"

"He didn't," Neville managed to spit out.

"No! No! I didn't," Wayne agreed, "We picked him up and he didn't say anything about it."

"Of course he wouldn't," Vernon snarled, "He's probably trying to infiltrate us. Learn our ways and then kill us in our sleep!" Vernon roared the last part in Neville's face.

"I'm not," Neville wheezed, too tired to push Vernon's large foot off his chest.

"Vernon! He just helped us. Please don't do this," begged the sympathetic Wayne.

Vernon narrowed his eyes at Neville, weighing the options in his rather miniscule brain. He finally lifted his foot off his chest and raised the shotgun. Still looking at Neville venomously, Vernon decided on another option.

"He lives, but he gets as far away as he can. He can't stay with us. Boy obviously just attracts danger," Vernon spit on the ground next to Neville's face, "You stay with us, Wayne, but he goes."

Wayne looked desperately at Neville, the desolation and inevitability written across his face, "I'm sorry, Neville."

Wayne and Vernon started walking back to Number Four, leaving Neville on the ground, lying on his back and wondering what else could possibly go wrong.

2 days before the ultimatum...

Neville was allowed to retrieve his belongings from Number Four. Jamie and Cheryl were confused as to why he was leaving and Vernon granted him a small peace in saying that he was leaving out of his own accord. Vernon, after all, didn't want to frighten the

children anymore than they already were and inform them that Neville was indeed a wizard. Wayne simply looked sadly after him, not willing to stand up for Neville against his brother.

So Neville set out to London again, the bitterness in his heart ever growing as yet another family rejected him for his attraction to danger. For some reason or maybe it was just the suddenness of it all, their rejection hurt more in his heart. It was as if the sudden realization that he was a wizard who attracted attention was enough to dispel him despite his connection to the family. Neville walked morosely along the road, spotting the pillars of ash and smoke in the sky and not really caring for his own safety at the moment.

He briefly ran into Nott and his group but blew them off angrily, thoughts of Harry and his captaincy angering him yet again. He could do this by himself. He was determined to. He arrived at Borgin and Burke's a day later, managing to avoid detection in the process. A few concealment charms and a handy ability to go unnoticed went a long way to strolling back into Diagon and Knockturn Alley, even in this Death eater infested world.

He walked into the store and was surprised to find the owner indeed sitting there, looking unperturbed. Of course, the Death Eaters probably didn't bother him. Neville kept his jacket tight and the hood of his sweatshirt underneath the jacket on his head. He was strolling around the store, not really knowing what his plan was. The best course of action was probably to interrogate Borgin and see if he knew anything about ancient relics, but Neville was surprised to find something catch his eye.

He was drawn to it inexplicably, not quite believing his fortune. Would Voldemort really leave one of his Horcruxes so out in the open...again? It didn't take a genius to figure out that the diadem belonged to Ravenclaw. The crest was evident right on the crown. But Neville couldn't quite believe it. Was a part of Voldemort's soul on display? There was definitely something suspicious afoot, but Neville couldn't be bothered as to why at the moment.

It would have been foolish to ask for a price since Neville didn't have any money on him. It also would have been too auspicious to simply break the glass case and steal the diadem. He simply went to the next best option - at least in his mind, it was the easiest option.

He approached the owner and quickly cast an Imperio on him. It occurred to Neville that this wasn't exactly a great moral approach, but frankly, Neville was beyond caring. The only objective in his mind was to retrieve that diadem and not even Voldemort's surprisingly absent mind-attacks or morals would stop him.

Neville tucked the diadem into his duffel bag and exited Diagon Alley without anymore hubbub. Too driven by his desire to obtain the Horcruxes, Neville didn't give a second thought of how easy it was to obtain the diadem...

Post-ultimatum...

Neville spent the next two days holed up in an obviously Muggle residence, trying to decide what to do with the Horcruxes. He still had the basilisk fang in a compartment in his duffel bag, but he didn't quite know how to go about destroying them. The locket, once again, was difficult to remove.

Neville was moving safe houses when he suddenly stumbled into a room full of other Muggles. They looked at him hesitantly, not seeing his face under the hood. They were in various states of disarray but several people were laying on makeshift beds or sitting on chairs. They had a haggard look about them as if they had been in this locale for quite some time, but they weren't immediately hostile to Neville.

Neville pulled back his hood and gestured to them with a wave, "Hey."

He mistook the sudden wide look in their eyes as just surprise. Neville was unaware of the events that had transpired just the day before. He waved to them and took up a spot in a corner as he considered his options again. Unaware that the Muggles would ever do anything against him, Neville didn't think anything when the Muggles continued to move closer and closer to him.

It was a surprise when one of them grabbed his arm.

"What are you doing?" Neville cautiously asked as a man with hollow eyes looked at him.

"You're Neville Longbottom..."

It was more of a statement than a question.

"How'd you know that?" Neville slowly asked, his other hand reaching for his wand.

He was unfortunately stopped by another hand grabbing his free arm.

"Let go of me," Neville hissed.

But the Muggles didn't listen and started tugging him to his feet pulling at him. Neville tried to fight them off, struggling furiously to reach his wand, but there were too many Muggles intent on grabbing him and hauling him to his feet. He was fearful of them, wondering how they possibly knew him and more importantly what they wanted with him.

"LET GO OF ME!" Neville yelled as he struggled to no avail.

CRACK.

It was as if a whip had suddenly lashed across the whole room. The Muggles suddenly dropped Neville unceremoniously on the ground, their attention turned to the door where Neville previously entered. Standing in the doorframe was a man with dark, scraggly hair and several tattoos just barely visible on his chest. In his hand looked to be a rope made of fire. He was looking at the confused Muggles warily but confidently.

"I suggest you let go of him," he said.

Neville scrambled to his feet and looked at the man, instantly recognizing him now that he had his wits about him.

"Sirius?"

"Nice to see you too, Neville."

"This is perfect," Neville muttered to himself as Sirius led him along an empty wooden clearing.

The pair of them were somewhere outside of the London area and were traversing to a place where the natural anti-Apparition wards of the tower didn't affect them. Sirius seemed content with the locale and checked around a couple of times to make sure that there were no suspicious characters milling about.

"Alright, this should be a good spot. I assume I can Apparate there?" Sirius asked.

"Actually," Neville said, "I'm not entirely sure what charms or wards have been put around Hogsmeade. It's a safer bet if we Apparate somewhere outside of it and try to walk there. We should be able to do that since I've been in there already."

"Let's get to it then," Sirius clapped his hands together.

Neville stopped and stared at Sirius purposefully. Sirius stared back at him with raised eyebrows and immediately read Neville's intentions.

"You don't want to go back," Sirius stated matter-of-factly.

"Now that you mention it, not particularly. Not with Harry breathing down my neck the whole time."

"Harry can be a bit forceful sometimes," Sirius agreed, "But we have to go back, Neville. Did you not listen to what Voldemort did?"

"Yes," Neville said impatiently as he recalled the story Sirius had told him, "The evil git isn't going to get me anytime soon."

"We still should go back," Sirius pressed, "As much as I enjoy traversing around the countryside searching for you, I've fulfilled my part in finding you and now I have to fulfill the second part and keep you safe and as wily and full of guile as I am, I can't keep you safe out here forever by myself."

"I don't think I've ever heard a more back-handed self-glorification."

"I try my best."



Sirius chuckled to himself, "Let's go, Neville. Stop tarrying around."

"Not yet," Neville sighed.

"Okay," Sirius threw his hands in the air, "I'll bite. Why do you not want to go back besides having to face Harry?"

Neville thought of Hermione but declined to mention that little incident, "There's something we need to do first."

This statement caught Sirius's attention, "Oh?"

Neville peeled off his jacket and then proceeded to remove his shirt.

Sirius looked amusedly at him and commented, "Despite the stories and the whip and the leather pants, I can assure you Neville that I don't swing that way."

Sirius couldn't see it, but Neville rolled his eyes as he took off his shirt. Sirius took a deep breath as he saw what Neville was trying to show him. In the middle of his chest, hanging off a silver chain was a familiar looking silver locket with an 'S' embedded in the middle. But it wasn't the locket that caused Sirius to take a lung full of air, it was the patches of skin around it.

The veins and capillaries inside Neville's body were more prominent around the locket as if they were purposely surrounding it. There was an outline of almost burnt looking skin around the locket and it was painfully obvious that the locket was causing all of this exterior and interior damage. Sirius forced his eyes to drag upwards and meet Neville's forlorn expression.

"Neville...what is that?" Sirius asked.

"It's a Horcrux. I want you to destroy it."

"We have to find him," Hermione paced.

"That much is obvious," Draco muttered.

Hermione glared murderously at him but turned to Harry again, "Is there anything you can do? You said that you did something about Neville."

Harry shifted uncomfortably but said, "I had Sirius try to find him."

"Sirius?" Ron asked incredulously, "What's he even doing?"

"Wouldn't you like to know..." Draco muttered again.

Harry sent him a look that immediately silenced him despite Ron's curiosity. He instead reverted the topic back to the more important matter at hand, "Sirius is more than capable of finding Neville."

"By himself? One person searching all of England for another person that's trying to avoid everyone possible. How could you possibly think that's a reasonable idea?" Hermione was on edge.

Harry gulped but tightened his jaw, "I couldn't divert anymore resources to someone that doesn't want to be found."

Hermione growled in frustration and spun about on the spot, staring out the window as if she could locate Neville by just staring out at the landscape. At that moment, everyone who was a part of the Minister's army jumped. They simultaneously checked their wands and listened to a message that was apparently relayed to all of them.

"What is it?" Ron asked as he looked at all of them.

"All units are put out on alert," Nott muttered.

"And we have to go back to Hogsmeade," Harry sighed, "Moody needs to see us."

They Apparated back to Hogsmeade and were greeted by a flurry of activity. People were running about with various orders and it seemed as if Voldemort's message had been ill-received amongst the community. It took them a while to navigate the busy crowd until they found Moody growling orders at some poor bloke.

"Potter," Moody said harshly, "You have a new assignment."

Moody didn't even bother bringing out any sort of official paperwork. He simply gave the order, "Number one priority: Find Longbottom."

"All units have been put out on alert but I can't pull everyone from patrol. MacMillian's unit will replace you in London but your unit's sole and only assignment is to find Neville and make sure he's not in trouble."

"Yes, sir," Harry murmured.

"I'm already fielding calls from our Muggle counter-parts and they're giving plenty of thought to considering Voldemort's request," Moody gravely informed them.

"They can't be serious?" Hermione was shocked at the very thought of that sort of negligence.

"They're very serious, missy," Moody fixed both of his eyes at her, "A bunch of Muggles who are dealing with magic for the first time just saw the most evil wizard in the world effectively behead one of their soldiers while stopping his bullets without so much as moving. Their official policy is 'not to deal with terrorists' but they haven't met anyone like Voldemort."

"But they can't possibly believe Voldemort will allow them peace! They've seen him. Even if they don't have a full grasp of magic, they have to know that he's not going to stop!" Hermione reasoned.

"Trust me - they have that area covered as well. There's two camps going around with the Muggles. Some of 'em just want to give Longbottom up to Voldemort and see how it runs while the other..." Moody sighed, looking aged for the first time in a long time, "They want to use a bit more practical force."

"Practical force?" Ron looked confused, "What could Muggles possibly do?"

"Don't underestimate them Weasley," Moody growled, "They're capable of horrific things."

"They're not going to nuke it, are they?" Hermione connected the dots with a shock of realization.

"No - not yet anyways."

"Excuse me," Michael Corner butted in, "For those of us who don't know what - um - nuke is?"

"It's a bomb," Dean explained, "Just a huge bomb that's capable of leveling an entire city and rendering it inhabitable for decades."

"They're not going to resort to that," Moody tried to explain, "But that doesn't mean they don't got other things in their arsenal that they're going to try."

"It's not going to work," Harry frowned, "If the tower was truly created by the Founders like Dumbledore said, then it has to have some sort of magical defenses."

"Fact of the matter is that no one knows what exactly the tower can or can't do. It's been a myth up until now," Moody admitted, "That doesn't mean the Muggles aren't going to try so let's try to sort it out and find Longbottom first. Then, we can deal with what the Muggles are going to try."

Moody turned both his eyes to Harry, "Find him."

"Excuse me if I find this a bit hard to grasp, but you want me to destroy a piece of Voldemort's soul that somehow manages to stop his invasions into your mind?" Sirius repeated.

"In a nutshell."

"You lead a complicated life, Mr. Longbottom," Sirius let out a low whistle, "Tell me again why you can't destroy it."

"I just...can't," Neville lamely shrugged his shoulders, "I've tried to but it has this...hold over me."

"I see," Sirius nodded.

They were sitting in a clearing in the middle of the woods, facing each other. Upon Sirius's request, Neville had sheepishly put his shirt back on, embarrassed by the sudden display. Sirius was joking about the locket but internally, he was weighing the options at the sudden realization that he could somehow help this boy more than

he knew. If he could destroy a piece of Voldemort's soul and help Neville...

"So what do I have to do?" Sirius asked.

"You'll do it then?" Neville's eyes were hopeful.

"If you say you can't, I'm not going to say no to sticking it to Voldemort."

Neville's shoulders sagged with relief as he realized that Sirius seemingly accepted Neville's hesitance at destroying the Horcrux without too much thought. Though he didn't quite know what was going on in the former Marauder's mind, Neville was grateful that Sirius seemed to accept the challenge.

"While we're on the subject..." Neville reached into his duffel bag and pulled out the diadem.

Sirius looked at it carefully and logically deduced, "That's also a Horcrux, I presume?"

"Right in one."

Neville laid the diadem in front of his crossed legs, examining it with a careful eye. It looked like such an innocent, innocuous object. Neville couldn't quite believe that it was supposed to be Ravenclaw's diadem as well. The dull silver didn't catch the light quite right, giving it a very antiquated image that certainly detracted from its supposed royalty.

"You have any more you want to pull out of your bag of tricks?" Sirius joked.

"Nope. This is it."

"These are all the Horcruxes?"

"No," Neville explained, "These are two of the three remaining. We've destroyed - well - a bunch of different people have destroyed the other the other three Horcruxes."

"I thought you said there were seven of them?"

"There was supposed to be seven of them. There's only six."

"So three of them are destroyed...there are two of them here...which leaves..."

"One."

Neville held up one finger to further signify how close they were to consolidating Voldemort's souls.

"Do you know what it is?" Sirius asked.

"We're almost certain it's his snake, Nagini."

"That would certainly make sense," Sirius murmured, entranced by the diadem.

"Which means the faster we get rid of these," Neville motioned to the two Horcruxes in his possession, "The faster I can kill Voldemort."

"Indeed."

There was a pause as Neville granted Sirius an ample amount of time to process the sudden avalanche of information. Sirius kept contemplatively staring at the diadem, his eyes sometimes straying to the locket. After a while, Sirius nodded his head as if he were affirming something to himself.

"Alright, let's get this show on the road," Sirius continued to joke.

"Glad you can be so chipper about it."

There was a sardonic tone to Neville's voice, but the slight grin on his face revealed his true emotions as he was relieved that someone else would take the mantle of destroying the Horcruxes. Besides the locket, which he didn't know was a Horcrux at the time, Neville hadn't actually destroyed a Horcrux. It seemed as if his destiny lay elsewhere. Neville reached into his duffel bag and pulled out a basilisk fang carefully wrapped in a leather cloth.

"This is what you're going to use to destroy it."

Sirius took a look at the fang and suddenly realized what it was. A genuine, youthful smile broke through his constant barrier of emotions.

"Wicked."

Harry was kneeling down, examining three dead bodies. He was in some sort of grocery shop on the outskirts of Surrey. Intelligence informed his unit of unusually high Death Eater activity in the area and Harry had a hunch, a sort of attachment to this area that he couldn't quite decipher. It felt as if he had been here before...

"Harry!" Hermione yelled, snapping him out of his stupor.

Harry's head snapped up, worried for a moment. His worries were assuaged as soon as he saw that Hermione was simply being impatient.

"Well?" she said with her hands on her hips.

Harry pursed his lips, trying to keep the biting tone out of his voice, "Killed by a Muggle weapon. A shotgun from the size of the holes in their chests."

"Post-mortem?" Padma asked, frowning as she looked at the dried blood.

"No, I don't think so. Usually the AK leaves a trace burn from where it strikes the victim. Unless the Muggle purposely placed a shotgun shell where they were struck by an AK, they were definitely killed by said Muggle," Malfoy cleverly deduced.

"Death Eaters?"

"Who else would it be?" Malfoy muttered as he turned over their wrists to inspect the tattoo.

"Three Death Eaters are disarmed and killed by a Muggle. What part of this story doesn't fit?" Seamus asked to himself.

"None of it," Harry sighed, "Which is why we're going to keep looking around."

"Peruvian powder," Malfoy muttered again as he picked up a few specks of dust between his fingers, "Not standard DE material."

"Neville had some Peruvian Instant Darkness with him," Ron remembered, snapping his fingers.

"It's a start," Harry grunted as he pushed off his knees and stood up, dusting his pants off in the process.

"Here's the plan -"

But Harry was interrupted by a loud rustle in the distance. There was a slow rumble as if a car was struggling to make its way across the road, followed by a loud boom - the sound of the exhaust kicking back. Harry made a few hand motions and the unit immediately made themselves scarce from sight.

They were hiding in the shadows of various nooks and corners, the only visible signs of them being the aftermath of their footprints steeped in dust and rubble. Only a trained eye would be able to see signs of a group of people recently in the area. Fortunately for Harry's unit, Vernon and Wayne Dursley were not that observant.

The pair walked inside the store, arms in hand, slowly canvassing the area for any signs of human life. Once they were satisfied, by their standards, they slung their guns and immediately started to pack a set of shopping carts with enough perishable food to feed a small army of penguins. Harry watched them closely, assessing their risk factor. They seemed harmless at first glance. Of course, Muggles would need to carry firearms with them to protect themselves from not only the unknown wizards, but the general anarchy running amok the countryside.

Harry gathered that the fat man was the de facto leader. He bossed the other around and Harry had a sense that there was a certain kinship about them. Though they certainly didn't resemble each other in terms of size, Harry could see the similarities in the arch of their eyebrows and the shape of their cheekbones. He communicated silently with Malfoy, indicating a precautionary and safe takedown. He would need to talk to them.



On Harry's mark, Malfoy stunned the fat man while Harry took down the spare.

Rushing quickly to them, Harry bounded them both and found a stowaway room in the back of the store, away from potentially prying eyes. He placed the set of them in there before awakening them, making sure to obscure himself by placing a bright light in front of their eyes. They blinked against the sudden change of light, their irises unable to cope with the quick transfer of light. It was strangely reminiscent of another time when Harry had to interrogate Neville.

Clearing his throat, Harry spoke clearly, assuming that they certainly wouldn't recognize his voice, "Who are you?"

Once the pair realized their predicament, a sense of panic began to take them over. Their arms fidgeted, testing the formidable bonds. They wiggled in their chairs, trying to see if they could somehow loosen the cords wrapped around their midsection. Harry had seen the escape tango before and knew that it was the first stage in scaring the information out of them. Hopefully, he would just need to resort to a little Legilimency in order to obtain the information he needed since they were incapable of Occlumency.

"Now listen here!" the fat man with the mustache said first.

Harry immediately shot a Silencio at him, effectively melding his lips together, not allowing him to talk.

"No, you listen," Harry hissed, "This is going to go one way and one way only. I ask. You answer."

The fat man eventually nodded his head, sweat pouring from his hair and trickling down his face. The other man looked meekly at him, visibly shaking from fear.

"Again. Who are you?" Harry repeated, lifting the Silencing charm off the Muggle.

After a moment, the fat man spit out, "Vernon Dursley."

The meeker man replied, "Wayne Dursley."

"Vernon. Wayne," Harry nodded to them even though they couldn't see the movement behind the bright, obscuring light, "Now what are two upstanding gentlemen such as yourselves doing out here?"

Vernon looked at Wayne hesitantly, unsure as of how he should answer. He reluctantly replied, "We're getting food."

"For?"

"Ourselves," Wayne answered quickly. Harry sensed that the man wasn't telling the truth.

"That's a lot of food between two people..." Harry left the implication hanging in the air.

Their visible and nonverbal responses were too easy to read. Vernon shifted even more, sensing that their interrogator knew exactly what he was talking about. Wayne bit his lip, his eyes darting around frantically as the implication continued to waft dangerously in the air.

"I think it's safe to assume that the food is for more than two people," Harry continued his line of thinking.

"It's not. I just eat a lot," Vernon huffed.

"While I certainly do believe that, I think the more logical assumption is that you two are gathering food for your families..." Harry trailed off again, leaving a sense of danger and suspense between them.

"Listen, we're not hurting nobody -"

"Shut up, Wayne!" Vernon snapped, knowing where his brother was heading.

"Don't tell me to shut up, Vernon!" Wayne yelled back. He shifted his eyes to where he thought their interrogator was standing, "We're not trying to hurt anybody, just - please - let us go..."

"Perhaps."

Harry had to stay cruel. He had to continue to let them think they were in some sort of imminent danger. As underhanded and

immoral as it was, a threat to their family was the quickest way to make them fold if they were indeed family men. Harry didn't feel good resorting to this sort of tactic. It was precisely the reason only Malfoy was allowed in the interrogation room.

Harry reverted back to the topic at hand, "Assuming that you both were collecting food and driving the automobile, it's safe to say that your families live somewhere close. Perhaps in Runnymede?"

No response.

"Waverly?"

Still no response as Harry continued to list the surrounding boroughs.

"Elmbridge?"

"Guildford?"

"Spelthorne?"

"Little Whinging?"

There it is. The sudden twitch of the eye. The nervous bite of the lip. The little movements condemned the two men as they revealed their family's location.

"So Little Whinging..."

"No!" Vernon yelled.

"Too late for that," Harry made a scuffle on the floor as if he were leaving the room.

"NO!" Wayne bellowed, "What do you want to know? Please, just tell us!"

This time, Vernon didn't stop his brother as Harry broke them down easily. He hoped that he wouldn't have to sort to Legilimency and it seemed as if he wouldn't need to. He was never great at the offensive mind intrusion spell.

"Did you shoot the three men inside this store?"

"Yes," Vernon said through gritted teeth.

"Did you know they were wizards?"

"Yes."

"Why did you kill them?"

"Because they would have found us out."

"And that's how you deal with all wizards?"

"Most of 'em," Vernon answered, a sense of haughtiness and arrogance in his voice.

"Were there any more wizards?"

At this request, both Wayne and Vernon were visibly alarmed. Knowing that their captor could easily find their families, they had no other choice but to answer.

"There were two. Well - used to be two. Now there's only one."

"Only one?"

"We didn't kill the other one if that's what you mean," Wayne suddenly interjected, "He was one of the good ones."

Harry was definitely interested in this nugget of information.

"Go on," Harry intoned softly, encouraging them with softer tones.

"His name was Neville, don't remember catching his surname. We picked him up somewhere around 'pool - I can't exactly remember," Wayne rambled, "We didn't even know he was a wizard at first! Honest! He said he was just trying to find some friends. But - but -"

"The other bastards attacked us," Vernon spit, "Followed us after the Neville boy couldn't finish the job with these three inside here. Took 'em out, but I kept one of them alive."

"You kept one of the Death Eaters alive?"

"If that's what you want to call them - yeah - I kept one alive."

"And Neville? What happened to him?"

Vernon shifted uncomfortably, noticing the excited tone of voice whenever the interrogator mentioned Neville, "We kicked him out. Told him he just brought trouble with him."

"Brilliant," Malfoy muttered.

"Do you have any idea where he was headed? Any indication?" Harry pressed.

"I recall him saying something about London..."

"London? Bloody, fucking London," Malfoy angrily muttered under his breath.

"Not good," Harry quietly said to himself. If Moody's information was correct, the Muggles were going to bomb London in an attempt to obliterate the tower. Any civilian casualties were simply going to be considered...collateral damage.

"How long ago was this?"

"Only three, four days ago."

"Can't have gone far," Malfoy estimated, "He'd still be in the London area if that's where the prick was really going."

"We'll go after him soon enough. But first..."

Harry snapped off the light and cast a Lumos on his wand. The wand was the only light source in the room but it was clear enough for the two Muggles to see Harry's face.

"I'm going to need to see the Death Eater you captured."

"So you just stab it with the Basilisk fang?" Sirius asked again.

"That's how I did it with the diary...when I was twelve," Neville added as an afterthought.

"Seems...kind of simple?"

"I don't make up the rules of the Horcrux. For all we know, some barmy lady with too much time on her hands and a rabid imagination made all of it up."

"Doubt it."

"You never know," Neville shrugged.

"So which one first?"

Neville hesitated, but he knew which one he wanted to get rid of first. It had to be the locket. Summoning an inner power he didn't know he had, Neville yanked the chain off his neck and threw it on the ground in front of Sirius.

"The locket."

Neville was breathing hard, the unusual coldness already seeping through his body. Perhaps if Sirius destroyed the locket, the feeling would go away. Perhaps if Sirius destroyed it, this gnawing, needy feeling would dissipate. But Neville doubted it.

"Let's get to it then," Sirius stepped forward, the fang in hand as he set to destroy a piece of Voldemort's soul. As if it sensed its imminent destruction, the locket suddenly activated and opened, much to Sirius and Neville's surprise.

A wispy smoke started to pour out of it and swirl into the air, weaving into human shapes and bodies. It didn't take long for Sirius to see what it was going to resemble. The two columns of smoke turned into Lily and James Potter.

"How could you?" said the ghostly image of Lily.

"M - m - m - me?" Sirius stuttered.

"You left us, Padfoot. You left us when we needed you most," James begged him.

"I didn't leave you! You left me - left me to rot in Azkaban!"

"No! You did that to yourself, Sirius!" Lily roared back, her hair swirling and her eyes manic, "We should have been able to trust you from the beginning. YOU should have been our Secret Keeper!"

"It was a good idea to make Peter, they couldn't have known..." Sirius trailed off, suddenly lost even though Neville was calling for him to destroy it.

"But it wasn't a good idea!" James bellowed, "And now we're dead. Abandoned and dead because of you!"

"I didn't abandon you!"

"You didn't? Where were you when we needed you at Hogwarts? Where were you when the Dark Lord approached us and made me beg for mercy!" Lily continued to scream at him, her eyes not her trademark shade of green but instead a violent red.

"I would have been there...I could have been there...I should have been there."

"Yes you should have," James condemned him harshly, "We apologized. We were wrong and yet you continued to shun me. Continued to leave me out."

"Prongs..." Sirius begged, on his knees and reaching out to the two ghostly figures.

"Don't you dare call me that," James hissed.

"Please..." Sirius was groveling, reaching out to them, "Come back...I swear I won't give up on you."

Neville was also entranced by the ghostly figures of the supposedly dead James and Lily Potter. But he wasn't as attached to the situation as Sirius was and could see that the poltergeists were emanating from the locket. He yelled as loud as he could over the tirade that continued to pour from the malevolent forces.

"Sirius! They're not real!"

But Sirius was still caught in a web of depression and self-loathing, induced and created by the evil ghosts.

"Sirius! THEY'RE DEAD!" Neville screamed desperately.

Something seemed to snap in Sirius. It was like the last piece of a giant jigsaw puzzle snapped into place inside his mind. He resolutely stood up and glared at the two ghosts.

"I did abandon you. I did leave you by the wayside."

The two ghosts seemed to be caught off-guard...if that was even possible.

"But that doesn't mean I still can't do something to help you both," Sirius was still talking to them as if they truly existed, "It doesn't mean I have to stand by helpless now."

With a loud roar, Sirius lifted the fang in the air and located the locket still lying on the ground. With an almighty heave and leap, Sirius plunged the fang into the locket and watched as the two evil spirits screamed as they crumpled and finally disappeared into thin air.

Sirius was breathing hard, tears streaming down his face. Fortunately for him, his raggedy hair shielded his face and he was unable to wipe the guilty droplets away before Neville could see how much that clearly effected him. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and swept the hair out of his eyes to meet Neville's astonished pupils.

"One down."

Harry's unit followed the Dursleys back to Number Four Privet Drive. Harry was slightly amused to find Vernon looking at him as if he had seen a ghost. Vernon didn't comment at the matter, but Harry could see Vernon looking at him out of the corner of his eye every now and then.

"What is it?" Harry asked as they approached the house.

"What'd you say your name was again?" Vernon asked slowly.



"I didn't say, but my name's Harry Potter."

Vernon choked on air and Wayne had to pound him on the back in order to help out his brother.

"Everything alright?" Hermione asked, always genuinely concerned.

"Potter, you say?"

"That's right."

"I see," Vernon's lips were pursed as he trudged the final steps up to his house.

Hermione looked at Harry questioningly but Harry could only shrug back a response, not knowing how this man could possibly know who he was.

As soon as Vernon opened the door, they could hear a whiny, shrill pitched voice shriek, "Vernon! Thank goodness you're back! You took longer than usual and..."

Vernon's wife, Harry assumed, trailed off and paled as she realized they had extra visitors. She paled even more as she looked into Harry's green eyes. She then promptly fainted. Vernon barely had time to catch her as he looked fearfully into Harry's eyes.

"Knew you were handsome, but I didn't know you had that effect on ladies, Harry," Seamus commented as he amusedly looked on.

"Is she alright?" Hermione asked, rushing to them.

Vernon visibly pulled them back as if he were shielding his wife from the witch. Hermione visibly only bit her lip, just a small sign of annoyance from the man's prejudice.

"She just had a fright is all," Vernon explained in a rush.

"From what?" Malfoy drawled.

Vernon's eyes flittered to Harry and Harry now had to ask, "Me?"

Vernon looked at Harry for a moment with fear in his eyes. Nevertheless, he asked, "Are you related to James Potter?"

Harry's face hardened at the mere name of his father. How did this Muggle know who James Potter was? He could he possibly know? The anger started to swirl within him and it was only Hermione's petite hand slipping into his that calmed him.

"He was my father."

Vernon gulped and looked down at his wife, "This is my wife, Petunia. She is Lily's sister."

"Was."

"Excuse me?"

"She was Lily's sister. Lily's dead," Harry answered in a dead voice.

"Dead," Vernon mouthed soundlessly, worriedly looking at his wife.

Harry knew that his mother always had a sister. But in the events following her death, he forgot all about her. His mother almost never mentioned his sister, only once saying that they had a serious falling out once Lily married James. In the blizzard of events following the rise of the Dark Tower, the thought of Lily's sister never even registered on Harry's subconscious levels. Yet here he was...inside her house.

Petunia came to, her eyes blinking as she looked up at her husband's mustached and concerned face, "Vernon? I must have been dreaming. For a second I thought I saw..."

Petunia stopped as she realized that Harry was still in front of her, examining her with an inscrutable look on his face.

"You look just like him..."

"So I've been told," Harry said, his voice robotic and unemotional.

"Except for your eyes," Harry said in unison with Petunia, having heard the phrase multiple times before.

"I suppose you're her sister," Harry confirmed.

"I am. But - but what are you doing here?"

"We're here for something else."

"But Lily! How is she?" Petunia asked, a rare moment of genuine sympathy leaking into her voice.

Harry looked at his mother's sister sadly, a shadow passing over his face as he realized how pitiful their relationship must have been, "She died."

"Died?" Petunia gasped, clearly not expecting that answer.

"Months ago."

"Months?" Petunia continued to parrot, annoying Harry even further.

"Yes - months ago - and if you would have bothered to talk to your sister, you might have known a couple weeks after the fact," Harry spit at her, storming out of the room.

The remaining group was left in shock, Petunia still in Vernon's arms, Hermione standing helplessly in the foyer, and the rest of Harry's unit crowded around the door.

"Quite a show," Malfoy smirked.

Hermione shot him an annoyed look and ran off to find Harry. She saw him disappear down the cellar, a furious look on his face.

"Harry!" Hermione called out.

"Sister didn't even fucking know," Harry muttered as he stormed down the steps.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione tugged on his arm but he continued to walk down the steps and Hermione had no choice but to follow.

She was going to continue consoling him but stopped as she found two teenagers and a smaller child staring at them in fear. Wayne was already down in the basement, presumably hugging his wife.

Hermione took in the surroundings and found that despite Vernon's outward appearance, he seemed to be prepared for the vast wasteland of post-Tower England. Food stocked the shelves and there was a helpful amount of ammunition and guns stocked in the corner.

"Where is he?" Harry harshly asked.

Wayne pointed to another door in back of the room, barely visible in the meek light.

Harry stomped towards the door just as the rest of Harry's unit and the remaining Dursleys trudged down the steps. Yanking open the door, Harry looked inside and found a badly bruised man tied spread eagle against the far wall. His head hung down and there splatters of dried blood pooled on the floor. Vernon Dursley apparently didn't treat his prisoners well. Scars and cuts lined his naked torso, the tortures visible even in the poorly lit room. Harry clenched his jaw as he heard Hermione gasp behind him. He turned around and placed a hand on her shoulder to push her out of the room.

"You shouldn't be here for this," Harry told her.

"For what? Harry! He's already beaten enough as it is!" Hermione exclaimed, gesturing wildly to the prisoner.

"We need to know. We need to know why Voldemort would want Neville alive and so soon."

"To kill him obviously!"

"There's more!" Harry insisted, "Why else would he involve Muggles?"

"Because he's a homicidal maniac on a power trip. He thinks he can just break the rules that keep the magical and Muggle world apart! Who knows what he's thinking! You can't decipher and accurately predict the thoughts of a psychopath."

"Regardless," Harry said coolly, his persona starting to take hold of him, "The prisoner needs to be interrogated."

"And that's all, right..."

Harry didn't answer and signaled for Malfoy to come over.

"Harry..." Hermione said slowly as she realized Harry didn't answer her.

"Harry..." she said again as Malfoy walked into the room.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry slammed the door shut in her face and slid a locking charm in place.

Hermione fidgeted with the hem of her jacket as she took another glance at the door, wishing it would open and Harry would step out so she could knock some sense into the stubborn boy. The rest of the unit milled about, examining the packed basement and occasionally trying to engage the Muggles into some semblance of conversation. The teenagers were at first warned not to talk to them by their parents, but when it became evident that they were not there to hurt them, they opened to Harry's unit - especially Seamus and Dean.

But Hermione was in no mood for socializing or making the Muggles feel better. She needed to make sure that Harry wouldn't go through with the rumors she had heard. She needed to make sure that Harry (or Malfoy) didn't kill the Death Eater.

Approximately fifteen minutes later, the locking charm flicked open and Harry stepped out with Malfoy in tow. Hermione sprung to her feet, hell bent on giving Harry a talking to. As soon as he spotted her, however, he cut her off by saying, "We got what we needed."

"Good," Hermione hastily answered, "And now we're letting him go, right?"

Malfoy snorted, "Let him go, my arse..."

"Shut it, Malfoy. I don't care if you think you're the Phantom of the Opera with that mask, I'm still not scared of you."

"Phantom of the who?" Malfoy confusedly asked.

"Never mind you!" Hermione snapped, "Harry, we can't leave him here. It's inhumane. You see how they're treating him."

Hermione only had to lean a bit to inspect the torrid condition of the room that the Death Eater was imprisoned in. It was barely larger than five meters by five, only containing enough room to stand and not enough to even place a mattress in. From the snippets she could pick up in conversations, the Dursleys, at least Vernon and Petunia, only fed him sparingly and simply kept him there for...sport.

"They torture him regularly, Harry! Just for their own fun! Vernon may seem like he cares about his family," Hermione shot a look of disgust at the fat man, "But he's as contemptuous as they come when it involves wizards and that's saying something when it comes from me."

"Hermione, we can't let him go," Harry rolled his eyes, "He's a Death Eater. He's just as soon to come back and kill us."

"Harry..." Hermione patiently continued, "We're better than that. We're not them! This isn't a drastic measure. We Oblivate him and let him walk. No harm, no foul."

"Obliviation doesn't always hold up," Harry warned.

"It's better than leaving him here as the Dursley's play toy," Hermione hissed back at him.

Harry's eyes were dark as he mulled over the consideration. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Malfoy, his mask on, staring at him with a blank look on his face. He knew that Malfoy would judge him on his current decision, but he also knew that despite his...tactics, even this sort of torture sickened him.

He looked up at saw Petunia's eyes, staring at him curiously. How could this woman possibly be related to his mother? How could such a contemptuous, vile woman be related to his lovable mother? Was there something about his mother he didn't know about? Was there a dark side to her too?

Impossible.

"You Oblivate him. You've always been better at it than I have. Do it quick, we need to find Neville before it's too late," Harry said, his implied answer obvious.

"Thank you," Hermione exhaled in relief.

"Don't thank me," Harry said, his eyes still coolly resting on Petunia Dursley.

"I don't suppose the diadem will be any easier?" Sirius asked as he looked at said object.

"None of them really have," Neville shrugged, "Do you want me to do it?"

"No," Sirius noticed Neville's hesitancy, "You don't have to."

"I mean - I think I could do this one," Neville reasoned, "It didn't effect me like the locket did..."

"You already have to do enough, boy," Sirius clapped him on the back, "Let me take care of this one."

Neville nodded, a part of him hating himself for letting others take care of this Horcrux problem, but a larger part of him relieved that he wouldn't be forced to go through the process all over again.

"Think it's still got enough juice for one more go?" Sirius lightly joked as he held the Basilisk fang in the air.

"Should be. I have an extra."

"Prepared, are you? Impressive."

"I have my moments."

Sirius chuckled to himself but became serious as he looked at the diadem. It was such an innocent object. What could this piece of Voldemort's soul possibly contain?

"Here goes nothing," Sirius muttered.

Sirius raised the fang in the air and brought it in a downwards slashing motion, striking the diadem right at the crown. This time there were no evil ghosts or embodiments of Voldemort's spirit. But a different problem arose. A seriously more troublesome problem.

Sirius disappeared as soon as he struck the diadem.

"Sirius?" Neville concernedly called out.

Neville jumped to where the diadem previously lay but found that it was also gone. He swept his arms over the dead leaves, desperately looking for any sign of the diadem. He tossed them about, frantically and furiously searching for any sign of the diadem or Sirius. Panic set into him as he realized that neither the diadem nor Sirius was anywhere to be found.

Looking up at the gray and morbid skies, Neville whispered to himself, "What have I done?"

Sirius felt the familiar tug at his navel and even through the tumble in the air, he immediately registered that the diadem definitely wasn't a piece of Voldemort's soul. He fell on a hard, marble floor, the distinct cool feeling alerting him that he was not outside anymore. Groaning, Sirius picked himself up off the floor and looked up to find the last thing he expected.

Lord Voldemort stood over him, his wand idly in his hand as he inspected Sirius with a curious look on his face.

"Black? It seems as if you've intercepted something that wasn't supposed to be yours."



A/N: Thanks for being patient with the updates. School's been a hassle but I'm glad to bring you an update. I should be able to knock another one out next week, but no promises. I hope you enjoy this chapter! Thanks and leave one.

"Sirius Black. Certainly not who I was expecting."

Lord Voldemort of Little Hangleton stood over Sirius, watching him intently. Picking up the diadem, Voldemort held it to the dim torch lights of the room they were in. Sirius couldn't tell exactly where they were for there were no windows and the lighting was generally poor save for some strategically placed torches.

"Sorry to disappoint," Sirius spit out some of the excess saliva in his mouth onto the path of Voldemort's pacing.

Voldemort stopped, staring at the droplets of spit at his feet. He chuckled to himself, a low rumble that echoed in the undeterminable space of the chamber. He shook his head to himself as if he were quietly laughing at his own joke before fixing his red eyes straight at Sirius.

Sirius felt a slight probe in his mind and immediately knew that Voldemort was attempting to invade it. He struggled to close his mind, but Occlumency was never his forte. He was always too fiery and too impassioned to clear his mind of nothing but nothingness. He could feel Voldemort quickly do away with the miniscule barriers he managed to raise in his head.

He could see a rush of memories fly through in his head as Voldemort probed and sorted through his mind. Snippets of his childhood and life at Hogwarts flashed quickly in his head as Voldemort continued to search for the important, necessary memories. Several years of life in Azkaban scrolled by, which even caused Voldemort to hurry through the memories. Eventually, Voldemort found two key memories in his mind.

Sirius desperately fought to kick Voldemort off his head, but months of lackadaisical magical application and heavy drinking paid a toll in parts of his brain. He was unable to stop the madman from retrieving the memory of Harry ordering him to find Neville and Neville

instructing Sirius how to destroy the Horcruxes. With a heavy exhale, Sirius lurched forwards as Voldemort released him from the hold in his mind.

"So the boy has done well..." Voldemort muttered.

"Well enough...to...kill you," Sirius gasped out in between breathes.

"Not even close," Voldemort dismissed the comment offhandedly as if he were speaking in facts and truths.

"But it seems as if he can't destroy the Horcruxes himself..." Voldemort continued to wonder aloud, not particularly caring if Sirius could hear.

As Voldemort continued to ruminate on his thoughts, Sirius took the time to examine his surroundings and formulate, however implausible, an escape plan. There were no windows or visible doors to indicate any sort of exits. Perhaps there could have been a door or an entrance somewhere in the chamber, but the dark shadows obscured the edges of the room and didn't allow Sirius a good visible contact of exit. Voldemort didn't bother to bound him or even cast any spells. He only took away his wand.

But Sirius knew that without his wand, he wouldn't be able to run any further than two feet before Voldemort cursed him down. He needed to summon his wand back. He started focusing his energy on wandlessly summoning his wand from its spot on a nearby mahogany desk. He focused on the summoning charm and his wand, hoping that he could generate enough magic for it to work.

Voldemort continued to pace, lost in his own thoughts. At least that's what it looked like to Sirius as he attempted to wandlessly summon his wand. This, too, was never his forte. Although Sirius considered himself a powerful wizard, it required a different skill set in order to perform magic wandlessly. If you weren't born with that much power, you would need a very concentrated and focused mind and unfortunately for Sirius, his just wasn't up to par at that very moment.

"Don't bother, Black. You're not escaping from here," Voldemort said, continuing on as if they were having a normal conversation.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Always with your deplorable sense of humor. It's a wonder you didn't manage to talk your way out of Azkaban."

"Does it hurt? Knowing you were adopted?"

Voldemort whirled around at the comment, his eyes narrowing as Sirius smiled, knowing he hit a nerve. He knew enough about Voldemort's past to press the right buttons. If he could get Voldemort to lose concentration for just one split moment...

But Voldemort immediately smoothed over his snakelike features and smiled at Sirius, showing a row of pointed teeth, "I must admit that a small bit of me admires your ability to humor me even in the face of certain death."

"Being in your presence is certainly enough to kill me."

"I had hoped to manage that."

"Mission succeeded."

"Enough."

Voldemort finished with the pleasantries and struck Sirius with a Crucio for good measure. After releasing him from the torture curse, Voldemort paced around him like a predator stalking its prey. Sirius was on his hands and knees, his back aching and his mind pulsing as the after effects of the torture curse coursed through him.

"I want you to know this, Black. I want you to know that Longbottom will not succeed."

"Doesn't take much to get rid of you, Voldemort. You can die just like the rest of us - Horcruxes or not."

"I don't need these paltry Horcruxes," Voldemort sneered, revealing a piece of information that surprised Sirius, "Shocking, isn't it? You thought that was the key. You thought that if you, Longbottom, and his merry band of followers could destroy the Horcruxes, he could finally kill me."

Sirius wasn't going to say it, but Voldemort already knew he was right.

"Allow me to tell you that destroying the Horcruxes is certainly not the end game, Black. Allow me to tell you that I would hand deliver the Horcruxes to Longbottom as long as he was in my presence."

"You don't seem to be good at this keeping yourself immortal thing then."

"I was young," Voldemort admitted, "Foolish. I thought that Horcruxes were the only way to achieve immortality. But - that's certainly not the case now."

"Then what is it?" Sirius couldn't help but ask, hoping that Voldemort would indulge in his narcissistic tendencies and reveal his 'grand' plan.

"Though I suppose there's no harm in telling you since you will die, I'll refrain myself from doing so. You've already given me more than enough information for me to complete the process."

Sirius was confused by this statement. Voldemort couldn't possibly be referring to his memories. There was nothing in there but Harry ordering him to find Neville and Neville showing him how to destroy the Horcruxes. How could either of those memories help Voldemort achieve immortality?

"I can practically see the gears in your head, Black. You're trying to figure out - how? How is he doing this?" Voldemort was smug, relishing in his own supposed genius.

"I'm actually trying to figure out the fastest way to kill you, but I appreciate the thought."

Voldemort tossed his head back, laughing maniacally at the unintended joke, "You couldn't kill me even if I was wandless and you were in possession of all your faculties."

"Care to find out?"

Voldemort stopped laughing, the sudden change in demeanor reminding Sirius of those insane, bipolar individuals that were sometimes imprisoned in Azkaban.

"You've tarried long enough, Black. It's time for you to join the ranks of the dead...Mauraders," Voldemort drawled out the last word, the sarcasm very much intended.

"After you, asshole."

"So what did the Death Eater say?" asked Seamus.

Harry squinted into the London skyline, looking for a needle in a haystack.

"He needs Neville and he thinks the Muggles will fold if Voldemort puts a bit of pressure on them."

"But why does he need Neville?" Hermione implored.

"Death Eater didn't know."

"How do you know that?"

"Trust me, I know," Harry said with an air of finality.

Hermione chose not to push the matter, knowing that if Harry wanted to find out, he would.

"Then why do you think he needs Neville?" Dean interjected.

"I suppose the obvious answer would be to kill him," Padma pondered.

"Too obvious," Michael countered, "He can kill him whenever he finds him. Why does he need him now? Why does he need him so soon?"

"So we've established Voldemort has a time restraint?" the other Ravenclaw offered.

"Not necessarily," Michael continued, "Perhaps he needs Neville's actual physical presence."

"But why would he need Neville other than to kill him?"

"That's the million Galleon question," Malfoy finished.

"Either way," Harry said as he started walking towards the city, "Voldemort finding Neville is a bad thing. We can worry about what Voldemort wants after we find Neville."

"How do you suppose we find him then?" Ron squinted at the horizon, gazing at the destructed and misshaped buildings of London.

"Neville would probably be after the Horcruxes if he were truly in London," Hermione murmured.

"But a Horcrux could be anything!" Seamus stated incredulously.

"It could be anything, but it's not. Voldemort was very specific when he created the Horcruxes. He would want it safe. He would want it guarded."

"If that's the case, why would he place a Horcrux inside a safe that explodes in Fiendfyre?" Malfoy bluntly asked, idly touching the unblemished side of his mask.

"I don't particularly know," Hermione scrunched her nose, "That part doesn't really make any sense. Perhaps Voldemort thought the benefits of killing the destroyer of the Horcrux outweighed the survival of the Horcrux itself."

"That still doesn't make too much logical sense. Why not create something that would ensnare the destroyer and keep the Horcrux intact? Create a Portkey out of the safe or jinx the safe to curse whoever opens it instead," Malfoy continued to counter.

"I don't know, Malfoy," Hermione snapped, "Perhaps you'd like to enlighten us since you seem to be an expert on the topic."

"Hardly an expert - I just think that if he wanted to protect his precious souls, he would find a much better way than that."

Harry stayed silent as Hermione implored him with her eyes to rebuke his right hand man. But Harry refused, silently agreeing with Malfoy. There was something rather odd about the carelessness which Voldemort seemingly employed when it came to the shards of his soul. Harry's silence was answer enough for Hermione who deflated slightly at Harry's disapproval.

"Hey," Harry said softly, tapping the underside of her chin, "We'll find him."

"Alive, I hope," Hermione replied demurely.

"Don't do that. You're the only one of us left without a bleak outlook of the world," Harry joked.

"That's going quickly down the drain. I thought we had it tough," Hermione looked up to meet Harry's eyes meaningfully.

Harry shrugged, "You live, you learn. As long as we find a way to get Neville out of here before the Muggles show up, we'll have done this part of our job."

Dean's shrill whistle broke them from their conversation, "If you two lovebirds are done ogling each other, we've got a guy with a scar to find!"

"Dean and Seamus always seem to be chipper enough."

"Dean and Seamus would be chipper even if they were riding a train to hell," Harry stated flatly.

They eventually came to a conclusion that their best shot at finding Neville would be to return to one of the suspected locations of the Horcrux. Hermione still had a list of potential places, but the Trio had never ventured into London for fear of being too close to Voldemort. Now given a free pass and a unit escort, Hermione retrieved her list and looked at the very top. On the top of the parchment was a location that was both circled and underlined.

"Knockturn Alley."

Harry took great care to avoid all the major streets and roadways in London. It was in their best interest not to draw the attention of a

horde of Death Eaters in the middle of their own encampment. They traveled quietly, not daring to speak any louder than a few decibels as they communicated through mostly quick hand signals and head jerks. Once or twice, Harry thought he felt a stronger magical presence than the average wizard, but it went away as quickly as it came.

As they approached the usual entrance to the Leaky Cauldron, Harry took a moment to settle the unit and recon the area. He pointed his finger at the entrance at made a circling motion to Seamus, indicating that he wanted the Irishman to do a lap around the establishment and report back with any findings. Harry next pointed from his eyes to the building to Padma, signaling that he wanted the Ravenclaw to perform a revealing spell to ascertain the number of individuals inside the pub. Finally, he only he needed to glance at Malfoy to let him know that he wanted an Entrapment charm set around the building. It was a variation of the Anti-Apparition Wards except it also temporarily disallowed the residents to physically escape as well.

Seamus came back with nothing to report but Padma delivered the grave news. The pub was crawling with Death Eaters and if there were that many Death Eaters inside the Leaky Cauldron, there would be even more within Diagon and Knockturn Alley. Harry ran his hand through his hair as he surveyed the seemingly quiet front.

"...at the very least twenty Death Eaters around the bar alone. Who knows how many are actually inside the alley?" Padma reported.

"We can't all possibly go in there," Seamus pointed out.

"We can't," Harry concluded, "It'll have to be small. About...three of us..."

"I'm going," Hermione immediately insisted.

Harry wrinkled his nose, clearly showing displeasure at the fact. But he didn't have any other choice in the matter for she obviously knew the most on Voldemort's possible Horcruxes.

"I'll do it," Malfoy surprisingly volunteered.

"Can't," Harry said dismissively, "You're too recognizable."



"Glamour."

"Won't take the chance. They can easily detect your magical signature."

Harry met Malfoy's stony gaze with an insistent look, ordering him to stand down. Malfoy relented but not without giving Harry a nasty look.

"I'll do it," Padma announced, "It'll be less conspicuous if you have two females with you. You can just say we're your prisoners."

"Fair point."

There were no other complaints from the unit as they knew Padma was well prepared to handle herself should the situation turn dire. After a few custom glamour charms, Hermione and Padma were respectively changed into a blonde and an obviously dyed redhead. As Padma and Hermione found spaces for their hidden wand holsters, Malfoy took the opportunity to sidle up next to Harry and speak under his breath.

"This is dangerous. Waltzing into the middle of a Death Eater camp with minimal exit plans?"

"Necessary. If we don't find Neville soon, the Muggles will take this entire place down themselves and Boy-Who-Lived or not, we'll definitely be out of luck."

"I don't give two shits about Longbottom," Malfoy pointed out, "But you're going to put Granger at risk. She doesn't know how these Death Eaters work."

Harry gulped, flashes of war stories echoing in his head. He took a deep breathe, calmly trying to rationalize the decision. Hermione was the only one who could properly identify what or what not Voldemort would use as a Horcrux. Though Harry would have preferred to take Ron and keep Hermione out of a very dangerous circumstance, Ron would not be nearly as helpful in the task. Time was not on their side and the only way they could execute this mission quickly was to take Hermione deep into enemy territory.

"I won't let any harm come to her," Harry promised.

"Maybe so, but not even you can prevent the worse."

Malfoy left the conversation on that tone and slinked away.

"Yes I can," Harry whispered.

"Is this necessary?" Hermione fussed, pulling at the bits of her clothing that revealed too much skin.

Padma slapped Hermione's hands away from the torn clothing, "We're supposed to be his prisoners. If we don't look disheveled, they're going to think something's wrong."

"Absolutely barbaric," Hermione continued to mutter as she took in her appearance. Her shirt was torn in several places, revealing patches of skin and some of her bra. She wore a knee-length skirt that had a slight slit on one side of the leg, revealing just a bit too much for her liking. Padma was similarly disheveled, their costumes a necessity to prove their capture.

"Are we all set?" Harry turned the corner, his hair charmed to fall to his shoulders and his eyes changed from their usually vivid green to a dull brown.

Hermione nodded, accepting the task at hand despite her discomfort, "Let's go."

"Wait! One more thing!" Michael exclaimed as they were about to exit.

Michael raced over to Harry and grabbed his wrist. Ignoring Harry's protest, Michael whispered a charm and implanted a fake version of the Dark Mark on the underside of Harry's wrist.

"Authenticity."

"I don't know how you can stomach that," Seamus looked disgusted at the very mark.

Harry shook his arm so that his sleeve covered the tattoo. He would only show it when necessary for the very sight of it also sickened him. Clearing his throat, Harry jerked his head towards the door and held Hermione and Padma by their arms, mimicking a frog march that was expected of his so called 'prisoners.'

As they approached the entrance of the Leaky Cauldron, Harry hurriedly whispered last minute instructions to the pair of them, "Keep your heads low, the less they see of you - even Glamoured - the better. If anything goes to shit, both of you escape as quickly as possible. Don't worry about me. I can handle myself."

Harry paused slightly as he saw someone peek out through the window overlooking the street. Resuming his stride, Harry leaned down to whisper one more order, "Stay together at all costs. Padma, if something happens, Malfoy has the hook and ladder ready."

"What's the hook and ladder?" Hermione asked with her head still pointed downwards.

Harry didn't answer the question as he walked the last few feet with Padma and Hermione in tow. He had both of his hands in the crooks of their elbows, pulling them harshly along. Adopting a slightly haggard yet bored look, Harry rapped on the wooden door with his knuckles. A teenager, not much older than Harry, opened the door and looked inquisitively at Harry.

"Got some fresh meat," Harry said in a smooth tone as he jerked his head to Padma and Hermione.

"Quite," the teenager leered at the pair of girls. He looked up at Harry and Harry returned his stare with an authoritative one of his own.

"Who sent for you?" the teenager suddenly asked.

Harry paused, the gears churning in his head for a particular Death Eater's name. The teenager looked a bit agitated that Harry didn't respond right away and Harry could see his hand slowly towards his side. Knowing he had to say something to keep his cover, Harry gambled and said the only name that came to mind.

"Bates."

The teenager frowned, looking a bit perplexed but not overtly suspicious. Scratching his head, the teenager shrugged, "Bates only got here a few hours ago but the beast is insatiable. Come on in."

Harry kept his surprise to a minimum as he crossed the threshold and felt the Anti-Apparition wards take hold. The fact that Bates was here was not lost on both Hermione and Padma. Harry felt Hermione unintentionally move a bit closer to his side at the mere mention of Bates' name. Keeping his hair over his eyes to slightly conceal his face, Harry navigated through the unusually crowded bar, making sure to keep Hermione and Padma close yet not so close that he looked protective.

Hermione felt a couple of hands brush her sides and butt as they maneuvered through the crowd and did everything she could from yelping out. She nonetheless shivered at the crass contact, feeling the bile rise in her throat as flashes of another attack rose to the forefront of her mind. Taking deep breathes, she kept her composure as Harry reached the brick stones that lead to Diagon Alley. Harry tapped the stones in the necessary order and tucked his wand back into his robes.

"Remember, don't lose each other," Harry muttered to them as they stepped into Diagon Alley.

Diagon Alley was a mere memory of what it used to be. Instead of being a crowded marketplace for regular customers and upcoming students, it turned into housing developments for the Death Eaters and their few prisoners. It didn't take long for Hermione to figure out that most of their prisoners were females. She walked by a few of them and noticed they all had the same empty look in their eyes, devoid of any emotion or hope. Hermione couldn't help but tighten her elbow around Harry's arm, trying to find some semblance of comfort.

Harry noticed the movement but didn't do anything to otherwise alert the hundreds of Death Eaters roaming the streets. Most of them paid no attention to another supposed Death Eater and his two prizes, but a few of them cast a customary approving look over Padma and Hermione. The more forward Death Eaters even went as so far to give the girls a squeeze as they passed by.

"Just a little further," Harry muttered, hating the fact that he had to drag the pair into such undesirable circumstances.

"Over there," Hermione tugged Harry slightly as she spotted Borgin and Burkes.

Harry walked over to the rundown store and opened the door, the tinkle of the bell notifying the shop owner that he had a customer. An elderly looking man, his countenance very sour and grumpy, examined the trio as they entered the shop. They looked to be the only customers inside.

"What can I do for you?" he croaked.

"Borgin?" Harry asked as he let go of the girls.

"That'd be right," Borgin replied.

"You still selling?"

"All sorts o' items. Got some of them new squeezer chains in the back if you're looking fo' things that you can use on these lassies. Also got some other...adventurous things if you're into that sort o' thing. Personally, I'm ain't, but I've made my fair share of coin out o' it," Borgin answered in his strange accent.

"I'm not exactly looking for that," Harry looked disgusted as he pointed his wand at Borgin.

"Ain't no use doing that laddie," Borgin didn't look threatened at all by the wand, "Second you fire a spell, whole lot of 'em will come running to investigate if you're even who you say you are."

"Perhaps," Harry jerked his head towards the door, wanting Padma to lock it to keep this confrontation quiet, "I'm just looking for some things."

"Well go ahead and ask! Ain't like I'm pressin' for time," Borgin chuckled to himself, not caring about the danger Harry might even pose.

"Did Voldemort give you a Horcrux?"

Borgin stopped laughing at this question, realizing that this individual was definitely no Death Eater. He looked curiously at Harry, trying to see if you could recognize him.

"What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't," Harry answered.

Borgin shifted around so he could look at Harry fully, "You be askin' some dangerous questions, laddie."

"It's a dangerous world we live in, Borgin. Do you or do you not have one of his Horcruxes?" Harry directly asked.

"And even if I did -" Borgin sneered, " -even if I had a Horcrux, how do you suppose you think you'll escape? I can't very well let you stroll through Knockturn and Diagon with it in hand."

"I wouldn't expect you to."

"I see," Borgin cleared his throat as he shuffled from behind the counter.

Harry kept his wand trained at him as the old man continued to walk to a safe with multiple visible locks and probably even more hidden jinxes and curses. Borgin fetched a key of chains from within his jacket and jingled them to show Harry he was simply unlocking the safe. After using several keys to unlock several locks, Borgin wrenched open the safe and reached inside to retrieve an item. Turning around, Borgin suddenly tossed Hermione a silver object.

Hermione caught it in surprise, turning it over in her hand as she soon as she was able to regain her bearings. Even Padma was distracted from keeping her lookout as she also looked at the item Borgin tossed.

"That what you lookin' for?" Borgin asked with a sickly smile.

"Ravenclaw's diadem," Hermione said in a hushed, almost reverent tone as she kept turning the object in her hands.

"Is that it?" Harry repeated Borgin's question.

"It would make sense," Hermione murmured, "It's a relic of the founders."

Harry still looked a bit disconcerted that they retrieved the object so easily. At the very least, he expected Borgin to put up a fight or try to alert Death Eaters while they were in store. Harry cocked his head and looked at the aging man curiously.

"Why would you just give it to us?"

Borgin looked at Harry, the age showing through the crinkles on his face and the creases around his eyes, "The Dark Lord said for me to do with it what I will. I don't particularly know what it is and kept in a safe in case the Dark Lord ever wanted it back."

Shrugging, Borgin continued, "He never came back or asked for it. Only wanted for me to put up a replica and told me not touch it."

"Voldemort put a replica of the diadem inside the store?" Hermione paled.

Borgin nodded, "An' some ol' thief stole it. Someone's been on the prowl like you folk."

Harry met Hermione's eyes and immediately made the connection. Only one other person would have been looking for a Horcrux at this point. Neville.

"You still haven't answered my question," Harry turned back to Borgin, needing to know why the shopkeeper would give away one of Voldemort's prized possessions.

Borgin shrugged again, the action seemingly sapping his energy, "He didn't seem overly concerned and I didn't want to particularly die today. I ain't getting in a tussle o'er some knock off."

Harry accepted the answer but with a grain of salt and took no chances. Not wanting to stay at Knockturn for any longer, Harry didn't bother with a Memory charm and simply stunned the old man. Hermione pocketed the diadem in a shrunken bag of hers and nodded again to Harry.

"We have to go. If Neville thinks he took the real Horcrux, then who knows what Voldemort did to the fake."

"Whose to say that the one we have in our hand isn't the fake? Is there any real way to know?"

"No...not unless we're sure. But we'd know once we try to destroy it."

"And we can't do that here just yet," Harry finished, "Let's get out of here and regroup."

Still, Harry couldn't shake that nagging feeling that everything was falling a bit too easy yet again. Hufflepuff's cup in a self-destructing safe was already a reasonable stretch. For Borgin to simply hand over Ravenclaw's diadem reeked of suspicion. But Harry couldn't dwell on such negative thoughts in the current moment.

Resuming their positions, Harry took by their arms and left the store, keeping the door locked in case a Death Eater wandered inside and found the stunned storekeeper. They left Knockturn Alley without much fuss, keeping their heads low in the group of Death Eaters. They were almost back at the brick wall that lead back to the Leaky Cauldron when a voice suddenly rang out.

"What do we have here?"

Harry instantly recognized the voice and it sent literal chills up his spine. He turned around slowly, hoping that the owner of the voice would be different than who he thought it was. Harry was unfortunately mistaken as he spotted the grotesque and mangled face of Bates.

The Death Eater was smiling at Padma and Hermione, but it wasn't his smile that caught Harry's attention. The rumors were true about his leg. Instead of a normal limb, a metal stump replaced it, even adorned with five, sharp metal toes. Harry could see the tattoos that covered his arms from the parts of the skin that was shown by the robes. His face still remained wrinkled and deformed, a present left by Malfoy.



"You have yourself two pieces of fine meat on your hands," Bates addressed Harry distractedly as he continued to look over the two women.

"Yes, I do," Harry knew it would be deadly not to reply. He felt Hermione shiver slightly beside him, knowing that she knew exactly who was talking even if she didn't dare raise her head.

"I must commend you. It's not everyday you pick up such...supple specimens," Bates limped his way closer to Harry, the heavy thud of his steel attachment echoing heavily against the cobbled streets of Diagon Alley.

As Bates came closer, Harry made no movement to turn away from him. He was frantically thinking of a reasonable plan of escape, but his options were dwindling. Revealing himself would obviously be suicide. There were hundreds of Death Eaters and only three of them. Bates considerable magic alone would be difficult enough to deal with much less the combined forces of the watching Death Eaters. No - that couldn't possibly work.

"What's your name, Death Eater?" Bates asked Harry though his eyes were trained firmly on Hermione.

"Nathan Drake," Harry quickly responded, the predetermined name being a joke from Dean and Seamus during the earlier days of the war.

"And where did you find these lovely young ladies, Drake?" Bates approached Hermione and twirled a lock of her hair around his index finger, leaning in and inhaling with a delirious look on his face.

Harry struggled to keep his composure, his hand tightening around Hermione's elbow. Nevertheless, he delivered a measured response, "I found them while coming back from a search. Poor bitches looked a little lost and I'm more than glad to give them a home under me."

Harry hoped that Bates would understand the message that the girls were his. The easiest way out of this situation would be for Bates to simply let Harry walk with the understanding that they were his prisoners. But Bates didn't look all that interested in leaving them alone.

"Oh but it would be selfish of you to take both of these girls. After all, I think I've probably killed more Muggles than you today and I think I deserve a little...prize."

The crowd chuckled as more and more people crowded around Harry, Bates, and the girls. Though Harry kept a calm visage, his body was starting to tense from the increasing probability that Bates wouldn't leave them alone. Indeed, Bates was now circling the trio, the hunger on his face evident as he pivoted around his steel limb.

"I think I've won these prizes in a deserving manner," Harry softly but steadily replied.

Bates stopped moving and finally tore his eyes off Hermione. His ugly, grotesque face twisted into a malevolent look as he looked at the person that dared question the prospects of his night. Towering over Harry, he stepped closer until he was face to face with him, challenging him in front of the gathering crowd.

"You dare deny me my bounty?" Bates hissed.

Harry looked up at him, a resolutely look in his eyes, "It is your bounty to earn."

There was a gasp as the crowd overheard the slight whisper. Bates was fuming, the crusted capillaries along his neck pulsing with an uncontrollable anger. Snarling, Bates turned on the spot and addressed the crowd, his booming voice carrying and attracting even more people.

"So you wish to fight me for the hand of two whores? They must be of some importance to you, Drake," Bates drew out the last name with much sarcasm.

"Not much," Harry continued to act casually, "I've just happen to take a certain...liking to them."

Bates whirled around, furious and fuming as he hobbled his way to Harry, "And what if I take a certain liking to them?" Bates was in Harry's face, his head twisting and turning about, "What if I like this one?"

Bates suddenly grabbed Hermione's arm and Harry unexpectedly let go, surprised that Bates would take such forceful initiative in the situation. Hermione whimpered as Bates grabbed her roughly and pulled her up against him. He stuffed his head into her hair, inhaling deeply and ruffling his nose through her manes.

"She's frightened. She absolutely reeks of it," Bates said with a maniacal grin.

Harry's heart suddenly thrummed even harder in his chest, his array of decisions slowly dwindling down as the situation took a turn for the worse. Padma was now pressed tightly against him, not bothering to hide her fear as the crowd pressed the radius of the circle tighter and tighter, anticipating the confrontation at hand.

"What do you say, Drake? I have this one and you can take the other," Bates grinned as he groped Hermione in front of him.

Hermione looked pleadingly at Harry and kept fidgeting in Bates' arms. At first, Harry thought she was simply trying to move farther away from the man's grip, but on second glance, Harry could see that she was trying to maneuver the bag that contained Ravenclaw's diadem. As she kept twisting about, Harry managed to see that she was trying to loosen the bag from her grip. Judging from the way she was discretely trying to hide it from Bates' view, Harry realized she was simply trying to find a way to give him the bag before Bates escaped with her. This plan would simply not do for Harry. There was no way he was sacrificing Hermione just to escape with the Horcrux.

"Harry," Padma hissed quietly enough underneath the murmur of the crowd so only he could hear, "Trade. Hook and leader."

"No," Harry whispered back a bit too loudly, immediately shooting down her idea to replace herself with Hermione.

"So you let the women do the talking as well!" Bates bellowed, much to the amusement of the crowd, "I think I'll just take this one from you, Drake."

As he started to pull Hermione away with him, Harry called out to Bates, desperate to prevent this abomination, "On one condition."

The crowd chuckled its approval at Harry's petulance. Bates had a smile on his face but didn't look amused. It was more akin to a parent smiling in front of his peers before he punished the child with a quick snap of leather. Still holding Hermione tightly, Bates nodded for Harry to go on.

"You duel me for her."

Bates cocked his head, obviously not suspecting the sudden proposal. He stroked his mangled chin, his face suddenly dropping from its usual malevolence. One red eye and one clear eye turned to Harry as Bates fixed all of his attention on the other supposed Death Eater.

"Unusual for a Death Eater to stake such a claim on a prisoner. You must have something special for her. Sampled the goods, have we?" Bates pressed his mouth close to Hermione's neck.

"In a manner of speaking," Harry replied with a certain amount of bile in his throat.

Bates scoffed, "I figured."

He tossed Hermione to the side and stepped forward. The crowd took a matching step back, anticipating a great display of wizardry. Harry slightly pushed Padma back but squeezed the inside of her wrist as a silent signal.

"Such a shame to kill a fellow Death Eater for just a slave," Bates unapologetically lamented, "But she must be worth the fight."

"More than you know," Harry whispered to himself as he removed the wand from the holster.

"I suppose I don't need to tell you I will kill you when you likely fail," Bates egged him on, his voice now serious and devoid of any amusement that was derived from the playful negotiation of Hermione.

"I'll be the decider of that," Harry replied, drawing spare chuckles from the mob.

"Very well then."

There was a split moment right before Bates raised his wand that caused Harry to stop and think of the predicament he had just brought upon the whole unit. But that was all Harry was allowed as he raised his own wand and started the process of what he hoped to be their escape.

Moody limped around the table, frantically waving his wand around as he tried to reassemble the representations of the different units within his army. On the flat table was a large scroll of parchment nailed down at the ends. Enchanted on the map was a mostly accurate drawing of England. Different colored dots representing unit positions, known Death Eater locations, suspected Death Eater camps, and large, friendly encampments crowded the map. Moody squinted his available eye and frowned as he saw the gap grow larger between the largely Slytherin unit and MacMillan's unit. He tapped his wand on both units and drew out a message on a blank box on the bottom part of the parchment. The message would immediately be delivered to each of the unit's wand via a charm that the Potter had created.

Shore up and close the gaps.

As Moody hobbled around to plan out more strategically moves, he was interrupted by a cough from the entrance of the tent. Moody used his magical eye to identify the intrusion, his hand automatically reaching for his wand from years of paranoid experience. As he identified the target, however, his hand relaxed as he realized it was the Muggle, Samson.

"Samson," Moody said before he turned around. He found that most people were intimidated when they realized he could see them even with his back turned. It allowed him to immediately achieve superiority in the conversation.

"Mr. Moody," Samson replied in greeting.

"No mister, just Moody."

"Aye," Samson nodded as he stepped forward into the center of the tent, curiously inspecting the enchanted map, "I've come here to discuss the Prime Minister's decision."

There was a pause as Moody said nothing in reply. Realizing that Samson wasn't going to continue, Moody stamped his wooden leg impatiently, "Alright! Go on then!"

Samson threw him a critical eye but kept pacing around the table, "The Minister has authorized the use of carpet bombing for the entire effective area around the tower. We're giving last minute

evacuation orders for anyone still within the radius but after that..." Samson trailed off, leaving the implication hanging in the air.

"Your chances of success are very low," Moody growled pessimistically, "The tower is ancient magic and even with your supposed advanced technology, I doubt it will even leave a blimp on the tower."

"But you don't know that," Samson calmly countered, "You said it yourself: you don't know the applications of the tower."

"No," Moody relented, "But trust me when I say this is going to do more harm than good. You'll just be leveling the entire area for not a damned reason. Not everyone's going to get that evacuation message. Hell, I still have units inside there!"

"Well pull them out," Samson fumed, his temper finally showing, "We're sick and tired of waiting around and watching this maniac go on the telly and threaten us to capture some teenager wandering the wasteland that is now our country and execute our own soldiers. We have to do something."

Moody was silent as he realized the implications of Muggle involvement. Voldemort would only escalate the situation against them, possibly causing the more desperate Muggles to indeed turn Neville in if the boy happened to run into some of the Muggles that were ready for this magical tyranny to end.

"Do you have an ETA for the bombers?" Moody asked.

"The bombers are being launched via aircraft. The Minister is ready to give the signal tonight," Samson gulped.

"Tonight?" Moody whirled around, both of his eyes frantically trained on the Muggle, "Tonight?"

"That's why I'm here," Samson steeled himself, "They weren't going to warn you, but I figured to give you as much time as I possibly could allow. The decision only went through yesterday."

"Yesterday," Moody whispered to himself as he approached the table and looked at the map.

There were units stationed around the accepted perimeter of the tower, but none close enough where they wouldn't be able to escape the fire bombing. There was only one blue dot at the heart of the tower's location.

"Potter's unit," Moody said in a low voice but loud enough for Samson to hear.

"Potter? That's the one with the Irishman I met with Thorn, right?"

"Aye, Thorn, bless his soul," Moody nodded in confirmation, "They're in charge of retrieving Longbottom and they're in Diagon Alley."

"Diagon Alley?"

"It's in London. A magical location that used to be occupied by shopkeepers. It's now a main hub for Death Eater activity and they're right there," Moody smashed his fist against the table.

Moody scribbled a message and sent it, ordering the unit to retreat immediately. The charm wasn't sophisticated enough to allow the units to send a message back to headquarters. They could, however, send a number of chimes indicating a positive or negative reply.

Muggle bombers incoming. Evacuate IMMEDIATELY.

"What are you doing?" Samson asked.

"Waiting for a response," Moody said sullenly, "One chime is a yes and two chimes is a no."

"Sort of like Paul Revere?"

"Who?"

"Never mind."

Moody waited, hoping that someone in the unit, Potter hopefully, would be smart enough to give an immediate reply. After a few more tense seconds, Moody heard one chime...and then another.

"Why would they say no?" Samson asked, alarmed.



"Because they're either close or can't leave under their circumstances. Something dire."

Moody rubbed his forehead in frustration, his hand brushing against his crooked nose and his magical eye whizzing about his eye socket.

"What are you doing, Potter?"

"They're taking longer than they said they would," Ron said nervously as he paced in front of the window in the building across the street from the entrance of the Leaky Cauldron.

"Just slight deviations from the plan, probably," Su Li assured Ron, "Harry can handle whatever happens."

"Potter's never waltzed into a Death Eater camp with hostages in tow," Malfoy chimed from his spot in the corner.

"It wouldn't kill you to be optimistic about something, Malfoy," Seamus shrugged, "Or should I still call you Archer? You are still wearing your mask after all."

"He just doesn't want every Death Eater to come crashing down on him once they realize he's still alive," Michael idly commented as he too looked out the window.

"Corner finally uses that big excuse he calls his head," Malfoy complimented the Ravenclaw.

"Thank you, Archer," Michael drew out his moniker facetiously.

Everyone suddenly jumped, with the lone exception being Ron, as they felt the buzz that accompanied a message from Moody. Raising their wands to their ears, each member of the unit heard the message that Moody relayed. Once they were finished, they turned to each other in confusion.

"Muggle bombers?" Dean asked aloud.

"Tonight? Why would they do that?" Seamus also asked.

"They're getting desperate," Su Li bit her lip worriedly, "Voldemort killed a Muggle soldier and effectively told the Muggles they were

incapable of destroying him. That probably didn't sit too kindly with them and this is their form of retaliation."

"Will the bombers even do anything?"

"I don't know," Su Li answered honestly, "I have no clue what sort of magical protections the tower holds."

"Regardless, we need to get out of here before that."

"Can someone tell me what exactly is happening?" Ron asked as his head snapped back and forth between the arguing factions.

"Muggle bombers heading to London to bomb the tower tonight," Dean simply explained, "We need to evacuate immediately."

"But we can't leave without Harry, Hermione, and Padma!"

"We know," Dean tried to placate the quickly panicking Ron, "But we have to start making contingency plans as soon as they get back since they've deviated from the original timeline. Who knows how long they'll take to get back?"

"But I don't understand, I thought you had a plan if something wrong," Ron said in confusion.

"And that's the signal of something going wrong," Malfoy suddenly stood up and pointed towards the sky.

The unit turned around and looked to where Malfoy was pointing. High in the sky were bright, purple sparks. It was Harry's signal that the plan had gone awry and they needed immediate help.

"We have to help them!" Ron cried out.

Malfoy was already ahead of the group, sprinting up the staircase.

"Where's he going?" Ron asked.

Dean answered with a dark look on his face, "He's going to try to pull off the hook and ladder."

"And what's the hook and ladder?"

Dean simply shook his head in response.

Harry never intended to duel Bates. Though he knew he could take the brute on a one on one duel, it would attract too much attention from other senior Death Eaters in the crowd and force Harry to reveal himself. Besting one of the most notorious Death Eaters in a duel was not the best way to escape. Harry's only other option was to put up the signal for the hook and ladder and hope that Bates thought Harry was simply casting innocuous charms. Harry dodged the first curse Bates threw at him and immediately pointed his wand in the air and sent purple sparks high into the sky.

Still, this escape plan could prove to be a complete disaster as well. It was predicated on one thing and one thing only: Malfoy's flying ability. The "hook and ladder" revolved around extracting someone from a place that had anti-Apparition wards. Since they used their emergency Portkey prior, it was too dangerous to conjure another one lest they end up somewhere they didn't intend or worse - the Portkey would fail to work.

Thus, the safest plan of escape that Harry could think of was using the "hook and ladder." Only...it wasn't particularly safe. In order for their escape to work, Malfoy would need to fly above them with a powerfully resistant series of cords that could carry a number of people. Once Malfoy flew over them, Harry would latch onto the cord and hold on for dear life as Malfoy flew them out of the danger area.

The only problem was that Hermione and Padma would need to accompany him as they hooked onto the cord and Hermione was currently behind Bates and Padma was somewhere behind him. As Harry dodged a rather harmless jinx by Bates, he struggled to formulate an exact plan while he thought of another curse that would buy him some time.

He needed something that would distract Bates. Most of said spells fell under the category of obscuring Bates' vision but that in turn would obscure his vision as well. He needed to be able to see Hermione and Padma when Malfoy performed the fly over. Of course, a simple drawback for the hook and ladder plan would be that the Death Eaters would give chase on their brooms, but Harry reckoned that Malfoy could get away and stow them somewhere safe before the Death Eaters had a solid chance at taking flight.

Harry futilely aimed a Jelly Legs hex at Bates. Bates easily blocked the curse and guffawed, gesturing to the crowd, "Jelly Legs? Are you twelve?"

As Bates was boasting, however, Harry struck him with a Cutting curse. Bates wiggled to avoid it but his hampered mobility only allowed him a little space to avoid the curse. He couldn't avoid all of it and Harry grimly allowed himself a pat on the back as the tiniest bit of blood was drawn from Bates' side.

Bates seemed shocked that Harry drew blood so early and so effortlessly. He dipped his finger into the cut, not minding the pain, and stared at it incredulously. He chuckled to himself, a dark sort of chuckle with no hint of amusement, and immediately fired a volley of curses that put Harry on the back foot.

Harry twisted about, deftly avoiding the non-lethal curses. It was to his advantage that Bates was on the attack. Although it put Harry on the defensive, it allowed him a slight advantage in that he was spared from revealing his hand. If Bates even sniffed a trace that Harry wasn't really trying, he would immediately grow suspicious and suspend the battle in favor of a more tactical approach in capturing the supposed Death Eater.

Harry spotted Hermione inching away from Bates, trying to create some space with him while keeping the shrunken diadem hidden underneath her dress. He needed to somehow signal Hermione to slip out from behind Bates and find Padma so they would be together. As Harry deflected another curse with a shield, he decided to distract Bates by aiming at the metal stump that was his spare leg.

"Cremato!" Harry aimed at the leg, intending to ignite it on fire and hopefully melt the steel away. As he cast the spell though, there was just a tiny spark that flashed against the cool metal. The leg seemed impervious to that kind of magic.

Bates laughed at Harry's attempt to harm him and stomped his metal leg against the ground, "A gift from the Dark Lord."

"That explains that," Harry muttered to himself as he circled around Bates, trying to move him away from Hermione.

Unfortunately, Bates wasn't interested in moving more than a few feet each direction. It was obvious that his plan of attack didn't involve a lot of movement. He was content with trying to overpower Harry from a standstill. But Harry used his reticence to move to his advantage as he conjured a couple of fireballs and started circling around Bates, hurling the fireballs at him in the process.

The fireballs themselves were easy to deflect, but Harry's constant movement didn't allow Bates to get a clean shot on him. The crowd was protected by an invisible dueling barrier which left Harry's conscience clear as he kept running circles around Bates. He finally arrived at Hermione's feet and feigned falling over from one of Bates' curses.

"Get to Padma," Harry hissed to her as he rolled to avoid a particularly nasty curse.

Hermione gave away the slightest of nods, indicating she heard Harry's message. Harry scrambled back to his feet and continued to faux-fight Bates, hoping Malfoy would make an appearance soon. By now, Bates was frustrated that he couldn't place a solid jinx against Harry. Growling, Bates made a hand motion that Harry couldn't quite understand - that is - until he felt a Stunner come at him from behind.

Harry twisted, praying his flexibility would carry him far enough away from the Stunner to avoid it. It narrowly missed him, the magical energy sizzling along his robes as he maneuvered his body so he could keep one eye on Bates and another eye on the source of the Stunner. He spotted a Death Eater pocketing his wand, grinning at him lazily. Harry frustrated gripped his wand tighter, furious that Bates was using outside measures to distract Harry. Then again - it was surely Bates' style to cheat.

"Angry, Drake?" Bates mocked him.

Harry only grunted and conjured more fireballs and flipped them high into the air. Bates curiously watched them soar into the sky but couldn't concentrate on them as Harry aimed more curses at him, forcing Bates to deflect them and tear his eyes off the soon to be raining projectiles. Bates knew he didn't have a lot of time before the fireballs descended from the sky and started using more explosive curses to fend Harry away. But Harry was having none of it as he

kept Bates preoccupied and hoped that Bates' immobility would come back to haunt him as the fireballs fell faster and faster in the air.

Bates was forced to deflect the falling fireballs which gave Harry a clear opening. Juicing up his magic a bit, Harry used a curse that would cast both of Bates' legs in stone, completely immobilizing him. As Bates subsequently tried to free himself out of the imprisoning boulders, Harry used his preoccupation to lash him with a simple Disorienting Hex, causing Bates to see double and sideways.

Furious, Bates roared and swung his metal leg, easily breaking out of the stone cast. He remarkably wrenched his other leg as well and stumbled around, the Disorienting Hex causing him to sway on the spot. It was the perfect opportunity for Harry to finish him. There could only be one spell that he could use - only one spell that would ensure Bates would not follow after Hermione.

"Avada Kedavra!"

But Bates was not a foolish wizard. He knew his back was against the ropes and he anticipated Harry's death blow.

"Accio!" Bates called out.

As the green beam of light raced to Bates, an unsuspecting person was summoned in its way and accepted the fatal blow, sparing Bates from a sudden death. Harry was fuming, upset that someone else had to be used as a sacrifice. Releasing himself from the Disorienting Hex, Bates squinted at Harry suspiciously and shrugged off his outer garb, showing off his multitude of tattoos.

"Drake, is it?" Bates spat at him, clearly reeling from being bested at it for a short moment, "What battalion are you with? I'd like to inform your unit leader that one of their Death Eaters will surely be...incapacitated."

Harry didn't answer and fired a Stunner at him, delaying and frantically wishing Malfoy would hurry.

"ENOUGH!" Bates deflected the Stunner with a wild arch of his wand, "Death Eater! Battalion and Unit!"

"The Dark Lord's personal protector," Harry casually replied, still pacing around Bates.

The crowd fell into a hush, not believing the words that came out of Harry's mouth. Bates, in particular, looked furious with Harry's petulance. One did not simply joke about the Dark Lord.

"It is obvious -" Bates growled, " -that what we have here is an imposter."

"Clearly," Harry muttered as he spotted a small dot zooming along the sky.

"And that the Dark Lord will surely enjoy his death for even thinking he could grace his presence."

"Bates," Harry stood straight and stopped pacing, making sure to look at the mangled and disfigured man right in the eye, "I do not fear Voldemort."

The shock that reverberated through the crowd seemed to stun them for a moment. How could someone say the Dark Lord's name? How could someone even pretend to admit fearlessness? Who was he? But Bates and the crowd didn't have time to ponder the question as they watched the supposed 'Drake' point his wand at his two prisoners.

"Accio HERMIONE!"

Hermione managed to grab hold of Padma just in time as she felt the vigorous pull of Harry's charm. At the same time, Harry lifted his hand in the air and grabbed the rope as Malfoy flew over them, already weaving in and out of aimed curses. Harry felt Hermione's hand slip into his own and held for dear life. Looking down, Harry spotted that Hermione was keeping a tight grip on Padma and sighed in relief. But they were not out of the woods yet.

The added weight caused the broom to drag and buckle, unused to the weight and cargo attached to the end. As experienced of a flyer Malfoy was, he was having difficulty pulling them up to the proper elevation where they could clear the building skyline and escape Diagon Alley. Narrowly avoiding skewering the dangling trio on a jutting sign, Malfoy yelled down to Harry.

"Too much weight! We're getting pulled down!"

Indeed, the broom struggled and groaned against Malfoy's pull as he continually tried to jerk the broom upwards, hoping to clear the buildings. It wouldn't take long before the Death Eaters took flight and by then, Harry and the girls were easy targets for the picking. Harry frantically looked around, looking for a slight gap they could slip through.

"Malfoy! Over there!" Harry shouted.

"Unless you can magically create an arrow, I can't tell what you're talking about!" Malfoy yelled back as he dodged a Killing curse.

Harry couldn't use his hands to point as one hand was busy holding the rope and the other hand was busy holding Hermione. He had pointed with his chin, but Malfoy was too busy dodging curses to look down and see the gap.

"Between the red, brick house and the broken down apothecary!" Harry frantically yelled, twisting his own body as the spells picked up.

Luckily, Malfoy spotted the gap and started twisting the broom around so he could attempt to fly all of them through it. He looked at the gap that Harry was talking about and made a quick guesstimate in his head.

"Potter! Pull them up as high as you can or else they're going to lose their feet!" Malfoy ordered them as he leaned low on the broom and urged it onwards.

"Got it," Harry said mostly to himself as they flew closer and closer to the gap between the buildings.

Malfoy gave an almighty yell as he pulled the broom handle up as high as he could, the cramps in his hand building and the tendons in his forearms straining at the pressure as the broom fought him tooth and nail. Harry similarly yelled as he curled his bicep, pulling Hermione as high as he could, hoping Padma's feet would clear the small ledge attaching the two buildings together.

They were close.



There was a sickening snap that even Malfoy could hear as Padma's right ankle caught the little ledge. She howled in devastating agony, her ankle no doubt broken if not worse. Looking down, Harry spotted an ivory bone peeking out from Padma's leg, a sign that the injury was ghastly.

"Harry, she's slipping!" Hermione yelled as she tried to hold on to Padma.

Padma was quickly passing out from the pain, the jerky flight not helping her already worsening condition.

"I can't - Padma, please!" Hermione desperately yelled as Padma's wrist slid from her grasp. Hermione refused to drop her, however, and caught the edge of her hand to save her from a lethal fall.

But the slight jerk imbalanced Malfoy to the point where he swerved into a stray telephone pole, breaking off the tip of the broom. With Padma already swaying dangerously from the tips of Hermione's fingers, the situation worsened since Malfoy effectively lost all navigation of the broom.

"Going down, Potter!" Malfoy yelled as he struggled to control the broom, "Can you Apparate them?"

Mid-air Apparition, at best, was a nearly lethal task. Mid-air Apparition with two Side-Alongs, one of whom was unconscious, was almost impossible. Hermione heard Malfoy's question and formed the only solution possible.

"Harry, let me go! I can Apparate Padma by myself!" Hermione yelled up at him.

Harry weighed the decision in his head. He couldn't Apparate while Hermione held onto his hand, but if she let go, he could most likely Apparate cleanly. But if Hermione failed, she would most certainly fall to her doom.

"IT'S THE ONLY OPTION!" Hermione screeched.

"NOW, POTTER!" Malfoy yelled at the same moment as the broom quickly approached uncontrollable.

Harry looked down at Hermione's pleading eyes and gulped, praying to Merlin or what ever power there may be that he was making the right decision. He closed his eyes and let go of her, feeling her hand slip from his and focusing on his own Apparition.

Ron jumped as the loud pop of Disapparition startled him. Malfoy fell to the ground, banging his knees in the process and shaking the mask loose from his face.

"Malfoy?" Dean rushed to him but was brushed off by the former Slytherin.

Malfoy had a haggard look on his face, his blond hair spilling everywhere as he fought to catch his breathe, "Went to shit," he said in between gasps, "Back to Hogsmeade."

Dean nodded and immediately Apparated away, the rest of the unit and Ron following suit. As Ron felt the tight squeeze associated with Apparition go away, he opened his eyes and was shocked to find the commotion he arrived in.

Padma was laying prone on an examining table, obviously unconscious. It took everything in Ron's willpower to not vomit as he spotted her dangling ankle. Only a few sinews of tendon held the ankle to her leg. A group of Healers were crowded around her, already focusing on mending her foot. On the other table, Harry was frantically racing around a groaning Hermione. There was a lot of blood falling from her right arm and her face was twisted in excruciating pain.

"Dittany! I need Dittany!" Harry pulled out several drawers as he looked for the Essence of Dittany, hoping to heal Hermione's wounds.

"Move, Harry!" Cho said as she physically shoved him away and started applying the droplets along the gash on Hermione's arm.

"Splinched herself," Harry gasped as he fell back on his haunches, burying his head in his hands.

"She'll be okay. Keep applying this," Cho ordered her assistant as she leapt over to the other table to examine Padma.

"Harrrry," Hermione groaned, causing Harry to scramble to his feet and run to her side.

"Shhhh..." Harry hushed her, gently brushing her hair as the mediwitch continued to apply the Dittany.

"Is Padma..." Hermione let her question linger in the air, her eyes squinting from the pain.

"She's going to be alright," Harry reassured her, "You did wonderfully."

Hermione nodded, assured of her own abilities even as she lay on an examining table in pain. Harry continued to whisper assuring words to her, gently brushing her hair the whole time. Ron turned to Malfoy, who was adjusting to the mask on his face.

"What happened?"

"What HAPPENED?" another voice yelled from behind Ron.

Ron whirled around and sincerely hoped his heart wouldn't stop from shock as Neville suddenly raced onto the scene, Moody close behind him.

"Neville?" Ron asked incredulously.

Neville ignored him and stepped to Hermione's side, across from Harry. He looked down at her and called for her, but the mediwitch informed him that she fainted from the pain and it was best to keep her unconscious for now. Harry did his best not to frown at Neville and how the boy looked at Hermione with obvious care in his eyes.

"How'd you get back here?"

"Obviously knew where all of you still were," Neville murmured as he reached a hand out to touch Hermione. He spotted Harry's eyes though and quickly retracted his hand, not wishing to incur his wrath.

"And where's Sirius?" Harry followed up.

Neville paled and resolutely looked up at Harry, "That's the reason I came back..."

"All stations, this is 0. Radio check, over."

"1, okay. Over."

"2, okay. Over."

"3, okay. Over."

"All stations, payload check, over."

"1, payload armed. Over."

"2, payload armed. Over."

"3, payload armed. Over."

"Roger that. Command has given a go for Red Dawn. Approach and hold at two-two, over."

"..."

"All stations, target should be in sight, over."

"1, Black Star is in sight. Preparing payload, over."

"2, affirmative, over."

"3, affirmative, over."

"Roger. Drop and go. Repeat. Go, go, go. Over."

A brilliant shower of fire rained from the sky, lighting London ablaze in a visual marvel that could be seen with the naked eye from the moon. Explosions rocked and sent sound waves that could be heard across the channel in France. The ground shook from the explosive force, causing fissures and cracks in the various subways and underground tunnels of London. It only lasted a few minutes and the resulting silence was in stark contrast to the bombastic explosions just a few seconds beforehand.

"All stations this is 0, do you copy? Over."

"1, target hit. Over."

"2, target hit. Over."

"3, target hit. Over."

"Roger, return to base. Over and out."

The radio operator swiveled his chair and hit a button that switched him to a different frequency.

"Searchlight, this is 0. Do you have a visual on the target? Over."

"Searchlight, smoke is still clearing. Over."

"ETA on visibility? Over."

"Just a couple of minutes. Over."

"..."

"Searchlight, any better? Over."

"This is Searchlight, smoke has cleared and target is still standing. I repeat. Black Star is still standing. Over."

"Searchlight, is there any visible damage? Over."

"This is Searchlight, no damage. I repeat. No damage. Over."

"Roger. Return to base, Searchlight. Over and out."

A/N: Hope everyone likes this chapter. Thank you so much for all the great reviews and keep it up. Hopefully I have some downtime during the holidays to get a couple more chapters posted. Until then, thanks and leave one.

All twelve of them sat around a round table, Moody's enchanted map located in the middle. Harry sat in the seat closest to the entrance of the heavily warded and guarded tent. It was one of those clandestine meetings that couldn't be risked overheard by regular grunts. Sitting to his left was Hermione, looking on in fascination as the red dots symbolizing Death Eaters clouded around the tower while all of the blue dots symbolizing the Minister's Army slowly retreated to Hogsmeade. The Muggle carpet bombings against the tower showed exactly how strong the tower actually was. If it could withstand the hellfire and devastation of the Muggle equipment, it was difficult to keep hope that the wizards would be able to destroy the tower soon.

To Harry's right sat Malfoy, languidly lounging in his chair, his eyes constantly roving but his head still. Moody was to Malfoy's right, his magical eye whizzing around in agitation as he waited for Potter to continue his speech. Continuing counter-clockwise was Seamus and Dean, trying to ease the tensions by cracking a few self-referential jokes of their days in Hogwarts. Michael Corner sat next to them, smiling idly but looking nervously at the slowly moving dots on the map.

Neville sat next to Michael, directly opposite of Harry. He, too, was scouring over the map but kept a spare eye on Hermione, sneaking a few glances when he thought she didn't notice. It felt like forever since he had last seen her or talked to her alone. The only face to face conversation they've had in private since the incident was - well - the incident. Su Li and Padma, the latter's ankle intact, sat to Neville's right while the Muggle Samson sat adjacent to them. Rounding out the circle of confidants was Ron, his eyes glued to the map as if it were his own personal chess board.

"So that's it then?" Ron asked aloud, "All of Voldemort's forces seem to be moving towards the tower."

"I don't think even Voldemort knew how strong the tower truly was," Hermione quietly reasoned, "Now that he knows what it can roughly withstand, he can afford to bring his Death Eaters under the umbrella of protection and conduct his terrorizing raids from a central hub instead of a sprawling neighborhood. It doesn't allow us to constantly disrupt his camps since we can't come close to the tower anymore."

"Granger's right, of course," Moody conceded, "Voldemort's localizing his forces and removing our ability to conduct patrols around them. They're free to just move and strike wherever they fancy since they have an almost impenetrable hub."

"Wouldn't that make it easier for us?" Seamus asked, "Since we know where they all are, we can just trace and follow them as they leave to make raids and recruit more Muggles."

"Except we can't set up Anti-Apparition wards wherever we want. They're on the offensive here and their targets are anyone who doesn't subscribe to Voldemort's way of thinking. We can't be everywhere at once," Padma explained.

"But we know where they all are! Can't we just take them on?" Dean agreed with his roommate's line of thought.

"Even if we possibly could, the losses would be fantastic," Malfoy suddenly piped in, "Attacking them has no end game, Thomas. I know it's difficult for you to understand, but sometimes it's good to have a cohesive plan before we brazenly charge into the hornet's nest."

"I think I liked it better when you didn't talk."

"Enough," Harry cut them off.

"So what do you propose?" Samson spoke his first words to the council.

Harry looked at the Muggle with steely determination in his eyes, knowing what he was about to propose would not be received well by everyone.

"We need to attack Voldemort."

"See? Told you I was right," Seamus shot at Malfoy.

"I mean - attack him directly. Not just his forces."

"Hmm...I don't know about that," Seamus suddenly backpedaled.

"Not to be a pessimist, Harry, but that seems a bit impossible at the moment. There's a lot of red dots around that little tower of his," Michael pointed out.

"I haven't...quite...figured out a plan, but can we agree that it's our only option left? What we've been doing is admirable, but it's simply a stop-gap and delaying the inevitable for either side. How many more Muggles can we save? How many more people can we protect before we're all left to ruin? We've destroyed all but two of Voldemort's Horcruxes. If Hermione's right about what the last Horcrux is, it'll be with Voldemort. Once we do that, we'll have our opportunity," Harry spelled out the basis of his plan for them.

"I suppose that's where this one comes in," Dean jerked his head to Neville.

"Yes," Harry said icily, staring at Neville with barely held ferocity, "It's up to Neville."

All eyes turned to the Boy-Who-Lived, suddenly putting him under the spotlight. Neville nervously shifted around but held Harry's gaze, not willing to crumble under his glare. Clearing his throat, Neville nodded his head, "You're right."

"So..." Samson's eyes turned from Harry to Neville skeptically, "What are you going to take care of this Voldemort chap?"

"I suppose I could start by killing him."

"Sure," Malfoy snorted.

"Shut it, Malfoy," Neville said tiredly, "No one cares what you think."

"I care what he thinks," Harry snapped, defending the masked man.

"What I think Neville is trying to say..." Hermione lead in, hoping to ease the tension, "...is that we just have to present him with an opportunity to face Voldemort unobstructed. Voldemort, for all his magical mastery, tends to surround himself to make sure he doesn't ever have to face Neville alone. He's still afraid of him."

"I'm not even afraid of Longbottom," Malfoy scoffed.



"Regardless," Hermione shot a glare on the other side of Harry, "If we can get Neville alone with him..."

"Not to rain on your confidences, Granger, but I can't say I fancy the odds of a duel between Longbottom and Voldemort," Moody wasn't one to be sensitive when it came to these types of subjects.

Neville burned red at the comment, but didn't rebut. Moody was simply expressing his opinion on a topic he was extremely knowledgeable about.

"What of your connection with him, Longbottom? You able to control yourself?" Moody continued to interrogate him.

"I - I don't know. It comes and goes," Neville stuttered.

"It comes and goes? How is that even remotely reliable?" Malfoy was in full force now as he pushed away from the table and stood up to point an accusing finger at Neville, "Longbottom's a liability. How can anyone else not see that?"

"He's also the only chance we have at defeating Voldemort," Ron rose to Neville's defense for once.

"Bullshit, I've never believed that old bat and I'm certainly not going to believe her when my life is on the line. Longbottom is not NOT the answer!"

"ENOUGH of this infantile finger pointing!" Moody pounded his staff against the ground, hushing Malfoy at once, "Whether you like it or not, Malfoy - Archer - whatever the bloody hell you think you are - Longbottom has been our main answer for as long as this war has gone on. Dumbledore believed in him and I'm not one to rethink the words of the greatest wizard I've ever known."

Malfoy's face was obviously not visible behind his mask but the manner in which he pulled out his chair and sat back down was evidence enough of his anger. Huffing and puffing, Moody turned back towards the table, "I like your idea, Potter, but let's have something a bit more concrete. It would be suicide just to take on the entire Death Eater force by ourselves. We need to somehow get Longbottom and a couple of others in the tower."

"What's in the tower?" Samson suddenly interrupted Moody.

The rest of the wizards shifted uncomfortably and looked at each other for answers, the eyes slowly revolving until they settled on Hermione. Hermione opened and closed her mouth, never one to say she didn't know.

"It could be several things, perhaps the source of the tower's magic. It could also simply be a barren shell and the power of the tower comes from somewhere else. Perhaps -"

"So you don't know," Samson bluntly stopped her, his statement not a question.

"No one knows for sure," Harry softly saved Hermione from anymore stuttering explanations.

"Fine lot of information you have there," Samson muttered.

"Well your way didn't seem to work so I guess we're going to have to work off our lot of information," Harry sarcastically responded.

"Do we even know if Voldemort is inside the tower?" Lisa suddenly piped up.

"Yes," Harry confirmed. With a wave of his hand, Harry summoned a few photos from thin air. He passed them around the table, letting them all take a turn at viewing its contents, "The Slytherin regiment has been deep within the tower's outer circle for months conducting heavy reconnaissance and...persuasion missions. The photos you see are long range snapshots of Voldemort entering and exiting the tower. According to them, the only person in and out of the tower has been Voldemort."

"Absolutely no one else?"

"None as far as they've seen."

"That's good news, right?" Dean asked, "If Voldemort's the only one in there, all we have to do is get Neville inside the tower to face him."

"We don't know if the tower has its own inner defenses," Hermione softly said as she closely examined the pictures, "It's also curious that only Voldemort is allowed in and out. Is that his choice or..."

"The tower's?" Harry finished.

"Exactly," Hermione sighed.

There was a silence as they mulled over the continuously difficult and ambiguous task of reaching Voldemort. Moody rubbed his non-magical eye and made a motion with his hands. A big red 'X' appeared at the location of the tower on his magical map.

"At least we know exactly where Voldemort is. The problem is how do we get there?" Moody moved on.

"Alive preferably," Seamus quipped.

"We know that Anti-Apparition wards are set up for quite some distance around the tower so Apparating within is impossible. Portkey-ing in is out of the question since we don't have any sort of available safe areas within the tower's circle. Floo Network is completely shut down and they'd find a way to close it anyways once they realized forces were coming in. The only two options we have left are going on foot or flying in."

"I vote against flying in. They'll pick us off before we can get within a couple kilos of the tower," Dean opined.

"Don't really fancy a ground attack as well," Padma furrowed her eyebrows, "That's like fighting a land war on Asia. Don't think it'll turn out well."

"I know neither of these options seem promising," Harry conceded, "That's why I prefaced this briefing by saying I didn't have a concrete plan yet."

"So you've brought us into a briefing with no concrete plan other than saying we have to get to Voldemort. Interesting operation you're running here," Samson scoffed.

"If you're done belittling us, perhaps we can move on from your snide comments and formulate a plan that'll get us near the tower," Hermione coolly responded to him.

Samson reddened, embarrassed that he was reprimanded in such a manner. He opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione beat him to the punch and cut him off.

"I don't care if you were sent from the Queen herself. This is a meeting to figure out a way to defeat Voldemort, not to childishly pick apart our planning stages. You had your shot. You failed. Our turn."

Seamus and Dean were already snickering as Hermione tore into Samson, but once she finished, it was all they could do not to burst out in fits of laughter. They were content hiding their smiles behind their hands. Even Moody looked amused and Harry had his eyebrows raised in surprise. It was unlike Hermione to deliver such a scathing blow to someone wholly Muggle. The extent of wizarding discrimination was so high that even Hermione couldn't help but have a slight bias to those of Muggle descent. Apparently, Samson was exempt from this rule.

"She makes a point," Moody said, mostly to hush the ever increasing amount of giggles from Seamus.

Samson remained silent for the remainder of the meeting.

"In order for this to work, we need to establish two things. A way to reach the tower and a way to have Neville face Voldemort," Harry started.

"Lot of good that'll do us," Malfoy again grumbled.

Harry ignored the little quip and continued, "Given that Voldemort is still searching for Neville, it's safe to assume that he doesn't know where Neville is at the moment. An attack by us would at least buy us a big enough distraction for Neville to somehow get in the tower - yes, Padma?"

"I don't mean to bring this up again, but Voldemort wants Neville. He said so himself. Why are we granting him his one wish?"

Only Harry spotted it, but Hermione shifted uneasily in her chair. It was the same sort of movement she would make back when they attended classes at Hogwarts. Usually, Hermione would grow uncomfortable in her seat when she knew the answer to a particularly difficult question that no one else had the solution. Mentally filing that fact away, Harry turned to address Padma's query.

"Either way, Neville's going to have to face Voldemort if the prophecy is true," Harry lingered for a moment before continuing, "I don't know what Voldemort wants with Neville but the inevitable fact is that Neville will have to duel him."

Harry turned a wary eye to Neville, but saw his former roommate was unwavering in response. Whether or not Neville was up for the task was a mystery to Harry, but at least he put on a brave front.

"All that remains is how to get to the tower alive."

All eyes returned to the map as if it contained some secret hieroglyphic that would solve their problems. It was quiet for a moment, the difficulty of the task weighing down on the makeshift council that comprised of mostly teenagers. Neville suddenly leaned forward, instantly attracting the attention of everyone at the table. Squinting, Neville pointed at a small, black line leading out of Hogsmeade.

"What's this?" Neville asked.

"That?" Moody squinted with his organic eye, "That's just the train tracks for the Hogwarts Express. It leads straight to..."

Moody trailed off as he followed the train tracks straight to King's Cross. From there, it was only a skip and a jump to the tower. Granted, it was in the middle of an extremely Death Eater infested area, but it was the closest they could reasonably get with minimal damage.

"Does it still run? The Hogwarts Express, I mean," Harry asked excitedly.

"Of course, we took it recently to pick up Samson and Thorn," Moody gruffly replied, analyzing the probabilities of success, "It's just sitting there."

"And what of the tracks?"

"I walked them for a long time back when I left," Neville informed them, "They were intact as far as I could tell."

"But that won't be the problem," Malfoy interjected, "The problem will be when the Death Eaters realize a train is heading straight towards King's Cross. The train itself won't survive the trip."

"We can armor the train," Padma pointed out, "There's enough of us to protect the train and the Death Eaters surely won't see it coming! If they haven't destroyed the train tracks, they certainly won't think we'll use the train to get there."

"Byproduct of wizard laziness," Moody nodded while his magical eye circled around until it was fixed on an object behind him, "We Apparate and fly everywhere and never think of using something as simple as a train."

"Plus - it'll go fast enough so that by the time the Death Eaters realize what we're doing, they'll have a hard time slowing it down. It's big enough to house all of us as well."

"Samson," Moody barked, "What was King's Cross like when you went there? Busy? Lots of Death Eaters?"

"Not that I know of," Samson frowned, "Saw some kids brandishing a couple of guns but that's about it."

"But he wouldn't have seen the Death Eaters," Seamus suddenly joined the fray, "They were magically hidden, but I could detect some traces of it when I went to pick them up. Judging by the amount of Death Eaters on the map, King's Cross probably has more activity now."

"But not directly at King's Cross," Harry argued, "We'll be landing in the middle of the whole hive, but if we can just cause enough of a distraction and get Neville in the tower, it'll be worth it."

Harry turned to Moody, appealing for his support. Hermione was strangely quiet, sneaking a few glances at Neville while the rest of the group argued over the chances of success of the newly proposed plan. Neville caught her eye once or twice but didn't maintain eye contact for very long, opting to contribute to the planning stages of the operation.

"We're going to take on losses," Moody muttered, "We're practically asking for it with this plan. But everything else is indefensible. Samson, can we expect any of your help?"

Samson crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed in heavy thought. He slowly replied, "Let me get this straight. You want to magically protect a train as it speeds headlong into the heart of all the bad wizards just so you can cause enough of a distraction to sneak one person in to fight Voldemort?"

"Roughly," Moody answered without blinking his one possible eye.

"I'll forward it along."

There was a mass of bodies circling the Hogwarts Express with spells being spoken every few seconds as the heavy armoring of their train to salvation began. Malfoy was directing the traffic, barking and bellowing every few seconds as he tried to perfect the defense of the train.

In order for the train to possibly survive a magical attack, it would need to be fortified as much as possible without causing an overflow of magic. The train, after all, was a combination of Muggle and magical ingenuity. It could only withstand and hold so many spells before it started to buckle under its own weight. Malfoy was tasked with the responsibility of finding the right balance between protection and stability.

The most important part of the process would be the strength of the VIP carriage. Within the carriage would be the trio of Neville, Hermione, and Ron. The operation would be a failure if they couldn't even deliver the three of them to their projected destination so it was the utmost importance that they survive the trip.

If the train started to take on damage, they would have to jettison the carriages one by one in order to offload the damage and hopefully

maintain the speed of the train, so placing the VIP carriage in the back would be out of the question. But Malfoy couldn't also place it right behind the conductor as he assumed that most of the magical fire would be focused on that area in order to stop the train. He hedged his bets and placed the VIP carriage two behind the conductor.

While they could enchant and fortify the train all they wanted, the fact of the matter remained that they would still have to fight and fend off the Death Eaters as they attacked it. Preferably, Malfoy would've simply fought from the protection inside the train, but that would leave them at a severe disadvantage. They would never be able to see directly above them, leaving them vulnerable to Death Eaters landing on the train and attacking them even closer. He had no other choice but to start making preparations that they would have to fight on top of the train as well.

"Is the conductor properly protected?" Harry asked as he arrived at the frantic scene.

"As much as can be," Malfoy replied, "Several shield charms, reinforced protection from residual damage, numerable cooling charms to keep from overheating, reactionary spells on contact, and a spearhead should we encounter a barrier. You name it - we got it."

"Good. And the VIP carriage?"

"Protected in much of the same manner. It even has a fail safe interior shell should they discover that Longbottom is hiding in there. Those two carriages are taking up most of the magical protection. The others...not so much."

"Risk we have to take if we want to get through this and get to Voldemort," Harry solemnly reasoned.

"Maybe so, but we're going to have to do most of the fighting ourselves. We're going to take multiple losses just trying to get to the tower. Once we actually do get there...Potter, I don't think we can possibly retreat alive."

Harry sighed and kicked at the dirt, his arms crossed in front of him, "We won't."



"It's suicide."

"Yes, I know."

"All to get Longbottom a chance at Voldemort. You do realize that Voldemort will rip him to pieces."

"Most likely."

"So what's the plan then? What's the rabbit out of the hat you're going to pull this time? This isn't Sheppard's class anymore, Potter. If we lose this, we die."

"I thought you weren't afraid of dying?"

"I'm not afraid of dying. But dying means we lose and for me - that's unacceptable."

"We're just going to have to trust Neville," Harry said without any emotion.

"You can't possibly believe that!"

"We don't have any other choice," Harry's tone ended the conversation abruptly as he walked away from Malfoy.

"Potter!" Malfoy called out, "If this is suicide, I'm taking everything down. Everything."

"I'm counting on it."

As Harry continued to walk away, all Malfoy could do was shake his head, "Am I insane for being objective?"

"Are we insane for being biased?" a voice from behind him asked back.

Malfoy turned around, locating the person who answered his question with another question. He rolled his eyes when he realized who it was.

"Yes. Yes you are, Weasley," Malfoy answered.

"It doesn't hurt to hope."

"It doesn't hurt - it kills. But if this is what Potter wants, this is what Potter will get."

Ginny sighed at Malfoy's pragmatism, "So you don't think Neville has even a chance at Voldemort? After all the times he's defied him? After all the times he's escaped from him?"

"Escaping is one thing, Weasley. Killing him is another. There's a reason no one's done it yet. There's a reason that Dumbledore or whatever host of powerful wizards - more powerful than Longbottom - couldn't do it."

"There is a reason. It's called the prophecy," Ginny said with the faintest hint of a smile on her face.

Knowing she was purposely winding him up, Malfoy nonetheless took the bait, "Again - more ridiculousness from a loon. Yes, she's a loon. Everyone thought so and I know you took her classes and had the same thoughts as well."

"But what else do we have? Do you have any other answers for the most terrifying wizard you've ever known? Do you have any solutions for the tower? The best shot we have is that damned prophecy and everything else has come true so far. Why can't this come true?"

Though Malfoy would never admit it, her rhetoric was correct. So far, the prophecy hadn't faltered one bit. Still, Malfoy would rather relive the death of his parents before putting his trust in someone who couldn't even keep Voldemort out of his head.

"Don't think our opinions even matter, Weasley. We're going in this whether either one of us like it or not."

"I know, I'm going along as well."

"You are?" Malfoy raised an eyebrow at this admission.

"Yes," Ginny took offense to his condescending tone, "I've been at war longer than you have, Malfoy."

"No you haven't," Malfoy immediately replied.

"Yes I have," Ginny scoffed, "If you don't remember, I got the damned blue letter long before you even put on your stupid mask."

Ginny almost imagined a faint blush on Malfoy's cheeks but obviously couldn't see it because of his wretched mask.

"And why do you still wear that thing?" Ginny flapped her arms exasperatedly.

"For this precise reason."

"What reason?"

"To annoy people like you."

Harry walked into his personal tent and found Hermione pouring over her own set of notes. She was sitting cross-legged on their bed, oblivious to Harry's presence as he entered. He liked that about her. Her focus was unbreakable, over obsessive, and undeniably attractive. The way she blocked out everything else to pursue her goals reminded him of her nearly neurotic need to take care of him when he was faltering. He would never forget her support in that time and intended to repay it in kind.

"What're you looking at?" Harry braved the waters and interrupted her.

"Harry!" Hermione put a hand to her chest, "I didn't even hear you come in."

"I know," Harry chuckled, "I stood here for a couple of seconds hoping you'd notice me, but you seem to be too fixed on whatever you're working on."

"Stuck is more like it," Hermione grumbled as she scooted down the bed to make room for him.

Harry sat next to her, his feet hanging off the side of the bed while she sat cross-legged near the pillows. In front of her was a vast array of sketched and written notes dating back to their days at

Hogwarts. Harry could see depictions of the several Horcruxes spread out across the parchment.

"I thought you had all the Horcruxes figured out already?" Harry frowned.

"I thought I did, but something's been bugging me."

"What?"

"Voldemort wanted seven Horcruxes. Not six - seven. Dumbledore told us that much. He's been back all this time. Don't you think he would've made another one?"

"Would we even know if he made one?"

"No, not really, but you think Dumbledore would've at least mentioned it once or at least brought up the possibility of Voldemort creating another Horcrux. But he didn't..."

"And that's what you're working on?"

"It's just an idea that popped into my head."

"Any theories so far?"

"A couple," Hermione's eyes glazed like it usually did when she was deep in thought, "Nothing concrete though."

Harry took a moment before replying, "It's not something we really have control over."

"But it's slightly important if we want to defeat Voldemort," Hermione said exasperatedly.

"As far as we know, Voldemort didn't create another Horcrux. If Dumbledore thought he would, he would've mentioned something. No one knew more about the Horcruxes than he did anyways."

"I suppose," Hermione continued to frown, not really crediting Harry's reasoning.

Sensing that Hermione wasn't going to budge on the subject, Harry decided to change the topic, "But we still have a possible Horcrux in our hands. Don't you think we should work on that instead?"

"It's sitting right there," Hermione pointed her chin at a small pouch sitting on Harry's desk.

Harry hopped off the bed and strode forward to pick up the Horcrux. As his hand closed around the pouch, a cold chill ran through his body, causing him to pause in discomfort. Dropping the small bag, Harry took a step back in confusion. He tried to pick up the bag again but froze as he suddenly heard a hushed, indiscernible whisper.

"Did you hear that?" Harry asked Hermione without turning around, his hand hovering above the bag as he let go again.

"Hear what?" Hermione said disconcertedly.

"Shh..." Harry put a hand to his lips, looking around at nothing in particular as he placed his hand on the bag again.

This time, a sudden rush of images flashed in his head. Harry saw the tower, a cloud of ash, a man whose face looked familiar, and a crying baby. Opening his eyes, Harry discovered he was looking up at a very confused Hermione.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered, "Are you okay? You collapsed."

"I'm fine," Harry squeezed her hand in reassurance, "Just...how long was I out for?"

"Just a couple of seconds. You fell on the floor without any warning. Almost hurt yourself," Hermione gingerly touched a growing bump on Harry's head.

"It's okay," Harry said dismissively, "There's something odd with that though," he pointed at the Horcrux.

"I don't mean to startle you, but this might have something to do with it," Hermione placed her hand on his chest and Harry looked down to see what she was doing.

The pebble that hung on a chain around his neck was glowing through the fabric of his brown shirt. Harry pulled the chain so the glowing rock was extracted through the collar of his shirt. Holding it in his hand, Harry looked at Hermione and said, "It's warm to the touch."

"It was glowing while you were knocked out," Hermione kept her eyes on the rock.

Harry closed his hands around the pebble tighter, half-hoping that it would cause some reaction. Nothing happened, however, no matter how tight he squeezed. Twirling it around between his fingers, Harry sat up and looked at his desk. Hermione followed his gaze, already knowing what Harry was thinking.

"Harry..." Hermione said in a warning tone.

"It's tied to the Horcrux," Harry said in an almost excited fashion, "It has to be! I've never...never actually come close to one before."

"I don't think it's a good idea, Harry. Hearing voices is bad but suddenly collapsing on the spot isn't exactly something comforting. What if - what if that's something dangerous?" Hermione pointed at the offending object hanging around his neck.

"Hermione, my dad gave it to me. It can't be something dangerous."

Hermione bit her lip, knowing a retort would be received poorly. Harry was grateful she didn't rebuke him; partly because he was right and partly because he knew that she didn't have a concrete answer.

"What if I -" Harry reached out to touch the Horcrux again, but Hermione sharply grabbed his wrist, stopping him.

"Wait," Hermione cried desperately, "Just - can we at least confirm it's a Horcrux? We are here to destroy the thing after all."

Harry opened but closed his mouth. If she held back a comment about his dad for his sake, the least he could do was confirm the validity of the Horcrux, "Get Neville."

"Okay," Hermione sighed in relief. As she took one step towards the exit, she stopped and turned back to Harry.

"I won't touch it until you get back," Harry cut her off before she could begin.

Hermione looked unsurely at the Horcrux but nodded, "Thank you."

As Hermione left to retrieve Neville, it didn't even occur to Harry that she would be inducing her first conversation with the boy since his attack on her. No - his mind was too preoccupied with thoughts of the Horcrux and the pebble his father had given him after his untimely death. Reaching up to softly touch the rock again, Harry wondered whether or not there was more to the rock than it being a simple gift from his father.

Harry had an inkling of suspicion that the pebble wasn't simply a parting gift. He took the chain off his neck and placed it beside him, staring at it and wondering if there were going to be any adverse side effects of taking it off him. But there was no gush of wind or sudden revelation. Harry held out his hand and concentrated on levitating a chair in the far corner of the tent. He could do it easily.

Frowning, Harry continued to look at the pebble curiously. It wasn't the source of his increased power, that much Harry could ascertain. It didn't seem to have a parasitic hold on him which left only one distinct possibility. The rock must be connected to the Horcrux in some manner. Picking up the chain and wrapping it around his neck, Harry looked up as he heard a noise from the entrance of the tent.

Hermione walked inside, her arms crossed in front of her and her eyes down as she quickly walked to Harry's side. Noting that Hermione placed herself slightly behind him as if she was using him as a shield, Harry watched as Neville followed her inside, his feet dragging and his eyes twitchy. Neville was even paler if possible, the blotchy spots on his skin standing out even more.

Harry watched Neville's eyes flitter around the room, taking the surroundings in as he quickly as he could. He watched the other boy's eyes flicker towards the single bed in the room and couldn't help but feel a small amount of manly pride. Squelching it down, Harry opted for a more business-like frame of my mind.

"Neville, the Horcrux is over there," Harry pointed at the bag on his desk, "Since we know the one you took wasn't the real one, we're assuming that this diadem is the actual copy. We need you to make sure."

Neville nodded wordlessly and approached the bag cautiously. He picked it up in his hand and Harry noted that he didn't seem to portray any sort of external discomforts like he did. Absent mindedly touching the pebble, Harry watched as Neville extracted the diadem from the pouch. As Neville closed his hand tightly around the diadem, he closed his eyes and shivered. Placing it softly back on the desktop, Neville nodded to himself.

"It's one of them."

"How do you know?" Harry asked.

"I just know," Neville said harshly.

Harry raised his eyebrows at the sudden response but said nothing. Hermione remained silent, still remaining slightly behind Harry. Deciding that Neville seemed to have the most experience with Horcruxes out of all of them, Harry broached the topic of his previous interaction with the diadem.

"Do you know if the Horcrux would cause anyone else besides you to have a reaction to it?" Harry asked, clearly surprising Neville.

"Just touching it you mean?"

Harry nodded his head in confirmation, remaining purposely ambiguous.

"No," Neville confidently responded, "Only when you try to destroy it."

"I see."

There was an uncomfortable silence as Neville looked at Harry, trying to decide the intentions behind his vague question. Harry's eyes were transfixed on the Horcrux, wondering what connection it had with the object his father gave him.



"Do you mind if I destroy it?"

Neville shifted awkwardly, looking back and forth between the diadem and Harry, "Preferably not. So far, no good has come of those who tried to destroy it."

"We'll get Sirius back, Neville."

"I'm not talking about Sirius. After all, that wasn't a real Horcrux," Neville bluntly replied, feeling more and more confident about denying Harry.

Harry considered the implication but forged on nonetheless, despite Hermione grabbing his hand out of Neville's view.

"What if I told you I had a reaction to the Horcrux."

Neville's jaw nearly dropped open, but he caught himself. Cocking his head, Neville looked at Harry curiously, "What kind of reaction?"

Before Hermione or Neville could stop him, Harry took two giant strides and picked up the diadem.

"NEC POSSUM TECUM VIIVERE, NEC SINE TE!"

Harry opened his eyes and found he was in a similar position as last time, instead now he was looking up at both Hermione and Neville.

"You idiot," she hissed at him.

"I'm fine," Harry grunted as he hauled himself to his feet again, "Did you hear that?"

"Not a thing," Hermione remained angry with him but answered the question.

"Curious," Neville said breathlessly.

"What does it mean?" Harry asked, mostly to Neville.

"I'm not sure. Do you - do you hear anything now? In your head?" Neville paused before the second question.

"No," Harry knew he was referring to Voldemort's intrusions, "Nothing at all now."

"Seems to be only when you have contact with the Horcrux," Hermione muttered, unable to stop herself from commenting, "What do you hear?"

"I heard someone's voice. Something in Latin - might have been a spell. I'm not entirely sure."

"But you can't recognize it? The voice, I mean."

"It's familiar," Harry squinted, trying to push into the recesses of his mind and find a similar voice, "But no, I can't say."

Hermione was silent for a moment before helplessly shrugging, "It doesn't make any sense. Only Neville should have a connection with the Horcruxes."

Harry decided to try something else. He released the chain and took off the pebble this time and handed it to Hermione. Hermione nodded as she realized what he was attempting. Neville looked at the rock in Hermione's hand, but Harry didn't feel like explaining its origins at the moment. Picking up the diadem, Harry was only mildly surprised that nothing happened.

"It's the pebble," Harry and Hermione said simultaneously.

"What is it?" Neville asked.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, a fearful knowing in both of their eyes.

"We don't know."

A/N: Update. Some of you should recognize the Latin from an earlier chapter. Big chapter upcoming. Thank you again and leave one.

A/N: This chapter is a bit short, but it's part of a series of segments that will soon end this story. Enjoy and leave one for me.

Harry exhaled slowly, a small cloud of condensation escaping his lips and drifting aimlessly into the air. The first speckles of sunlight worked its way across the ground until there was an orange glow at Harry's feet, expanding until it pooled around him. The light didn't stop at him, however, and continued across the expanse and up his body until it flashed across his eyes.

"Start the train."

The train formerly known as the Hogwarts Express creaked and groaned to life, the magically-powered gears churning and twisting in tune with the combustible roar of the engine. A plume of steam shot out from the chimney, signaling the antiquated boiler engine was ready for the journey ahead. The train started slowly, a stranger to the amount of magic being applied to the carriages. Eventually, it picked up steam and Harry extended a hand to grab onto the railing as the chassis rolled ahead of him.

"Are you ready, Ernie?" Harry asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be, Captain," Ernie grinned and saluted, keeping his other hand firmly on the lever that controlled the speed of the train.

"If we encounter a blockade, the spearhead should be able to blast through it without any problems. I made some reinforcements if we encounter a couple more. Once we're within the circle of the tower, there are to be no stops. Absolutely none. Is that clear?"

"Indubitably."

"See you at King's Cross."

Harry moved into the next carriage, momentarily stopping and recollecting himself before opening the door and stepping inside. Samson was leaning against the window pane, looking at the distant figure of the tower. Moody was calmly sitting down in one of the seats, attempting to light his pipe with the tip of his wand.

"We should hit top speed soon. It'll be a couple hours before we're within range of the tower. Make sure to let me know when we're within distance," Harry addressed Moody.

"Give you a shout when I can, Potter. Don't worry about that."

Harry nodded, "Samson, any last minute words from the Prime Minister?"

"I drew out the plan for the Minister and his cabinet. They couldn't decide on anything overnight. I reckon they'll still be debating whether or not they should send support while we're traveling to London. They'll make a decision by then."

"What do you think he'll do?"

Samson turned his head so he was looking at Harry and not at the looming tower, "To be honest, it's up in the air. Let's hope they do."

Harry tightened his lips, "About as fair as they can do. What kind of support would we be looking at?"

"Anything that can keep up with this train," Samson chuckled.

"Stop worrying about it, Potter. That one's out of your control. Go on and check the rest of the carriages. I'll give you a shout," Moody ordered him.

Harry left without another word and opened the next door into the VIP carriage. There was to be no one allowed into the carriage that contained Neville, Hermione, and Ron. The only way inside was a key that hung around Harry's neck, right next to the pebble. If Harry didn't survive the trip - well - that wasn't really taken into consideration.

Their carriage was hollowed out so that there would be a hallway connecting to second and fourth carriage. Should a Death Eater manage to find its way into the actual carriage, Harry hoped that they wouldn't be able to connect the dots as to why there was this unusual pathway. Either way, barring a complete removal of the VIP carriage, there was no way a Death Eater would be able to actually step inside the compartment holding the trio.

Hopefully.

Harry paused in mid-step, imagining the trio on the other side of the wall, discussing how they would achieve entrance into the tower. Closing his eyes, Harry imagined the Horcrux in the leather pouch tucked somewhere in Hermione's bag of belongings - undestroyed. His curiosity burned inside him, his chest tightening from the uncertainty of the cursed object. What was the connection between the Horcrux and the pebble that hung on a chain around his neck?

The answer would have to wait.

In the fourth carriage were a majority of Harry's unit. They were busy checking and rechecking the protective enchantments on the train, fortifying it as much as they could without weighing the train down. Ginny was the first one to catch him out of her peripheral and approached him.

"All the carriages are pretty much set. How long until the Death Eaters find out about us?" Ginny asked him.

"A couple of hours. Some of the patrols might spot the train but it's been through the tracks before without being attacked. I reckon they'll send a light patrol to see what's in the train. We'll try not to show our hand too early, but I expect once they realize what kind of cargo is on the train..." Harry trailed off as he lazily whirled his wand and added an extra attachment to one of the windows.

Ginny nodded, expecting as much, "Okay, I'll go don my gear."

"No," Harry stopped her as she turned around, "You're in the triage area."

Ginny's mouth dropped, the shock plainly evident on her face, "Excuse me?"

"Triage for you," Harry said without a hint of a smile.

The telltale Weasley blush spread from her neck to her face in a matter of seconds. She stepped towards him and furiously whispered, "Harry! I'm just as good as the rest of your unit. Bloody hell - I would have been in your unit if it wasn't Moody insisting I stay

at Hogwarts. I did that because he was the General and he could give me that order. This is bullshit."

"You're better than everyone else I know and can keep your cool in the triage area. We're going to lose a lot of people," Harry said grimly, "We need you to keep our forces ticking. Reaching King's Cross is just the beginning."

Ginny's jaw visibly clenched as it often did when she refused to agree with someone. Harry reached out a hand and squeezed her shoulder softly, "Please, Ginny."

Ginny stared at him murderously and responded, "Fuck you."

She whirled around dramatically but nonetheless set out for the triage section of the train, obeying his order. Malfoy made a snorting noise as she brushed past him. Although Harry couldn't see Malfoy's face, he could tell the other boy was amused by the tone of his voice.

"She's growing on me a bit," he said.

"Don't even think about it," Harry immediately responded.

"I wasn't thinking of anything."

"If you come close to her, I will rip that mask off and use it as a dish for your eyeballs."

"And I thought I was the disturbed one."

"You still are."

"You both are," Seamus interrupted them, "Everything's ready. I even put sticking charms on all the boots once we have to fight on top of the train."

"Good show," Harry nodded.

The soft thrumming of the train reverberated against Harry's feet and a slight curve on the tracks caused them all to sway in the same direction. Harry placed a hand against one of the chairs to balance himself but heard the train groan in protest.

Padma worriedly looked around her and said, "Hopefully this thing doesn't rip apart."

Harry nodded.

Hopefully.

Inside the secret compartment in the third carriage of the Hogwarts Express sat three sullen teenagers, all sitting an equidistant length from each other, forming a makeshift equilateral triangle. As if an invisible tether had been drawn between them.

Hermione sat cross-legged, a small light illuminating sheets of notes that magically stayed in place as the train shook back and forth. Ron leaned against a wall, one leg laid out and the other leg drawn up so his arm could rest against his knee. Neville slouched against an adjacent wall, his knees drawn up to his chin and the fringe of his hair covering his forehead leaving only his eyes visible. His eyes were focused on one thing.

The Horcrux.

Neville's eyes did not waver from the pouch that lay next to Hermione's left knee. He could practically feel the throbbing of Voldemort's soul, but Harry - of all people - gave strict instructions not to destroy it until he could find out the connection between the Horcrux and the pebble his father gave him. Unfortunately, they were pressed to board the train to hell and so Neville sat not a few feet from the Horcrux, unable to destroy it.

"What do you make of the connection between the diadem and the pebble, Hermione?" Neville suddenly asked, interrupting the repetitive clanging of the gears of the train.

Hermione stiffened imperceptibly but enough for Neville to catch even in the dim light. A deep streak of pain tore through his chest, a mix of guilt and self-loathing threatening to burst forth at any point. He squelched it down, trying to keep a clear head and throw away the pain that he caused Hermione.

"I'm not entirely sure," Hermione said without raising her eyes, "Since I don't know when James would have given him the pebble, it's hard to understand how such an innocuous object could trigger

that kind of reaction from Harry. I inspected the pebble and it does have residue magical traces, but I don't know what spell it is."

"And that's what you're looking up?" Ron asked, paying attention to the conversation from its inception.

Hermione raised his eyes to meet Ron's, an action that caused Neville to flinch internally, "No, not right now. I'm still looking over Voldemort's Horcruxes."

Ron's brow creased in confusion, "Why? We know what all of them are."

Hermione's eyes flittered over to Neville, once again an easy to miss movement. But Neville hadn't torn his eyes off Hermione and caught the tiny glance. She looked away immediately and replied, "I'm just double checking some things."

The finality of her tone was familiar to Ron and he didn't ask any more questions. Neville cocked his head and looked at her curiously though, wondering what she was up to. He decided to stoke the fire a little more.

"Double checking on what?"

Hermione fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable. Whether it was from his overt attention to her or her reluctance to answer the question was unknown to Neville, but he could easily tell she was discomforted.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth but opted to tell the truth, "I'm just making sure Voldemort didn't make an extra Horcrux."

"Come again?" Ron suddenly leaned forward.

Hermione looked between the both of them and helplessly answered, "He only made six of them. The magic number is seven not including his own soul. It wouldn't make sense for Voldemort to stop at six."

"Maybe he just hasn't had the time?" Ron offered.

"Maybe..." Hermione trailed off as her eyes flittered towards Neville again.



A light bulb suddenly clicked in Neville's head. With a tightness in his voice, he said, "You want to know if I felt Voldemort making a Horcrux, don't you?"

Hermione looked surprised but hid it in a few seconds. Her only response was, "Have you?"

Neville thought for a moment but decided, "No. I know when he kills people, but I think I would have known if he tried to make a Horcrux."

Hermione nodded as if she were expecting as much, her face still guarded, an unreadable look in her eyes. The train suddenly swayed and groaned, dust falling through the cracks in the ceiling. A commotion could be heard outside even from inside their compartment.

The train shuddered again and Ron sighed, "Here we go."

The Muggle Prime Minister repeatedly smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand, attempting to knock some sense into his head impenetrably thick skull. He cracked his jaw for a few times before the door finally opened and a thin man with thick glasses entered.

"Close the door."

The thin man shut the door immediately, sequestering the sunlight from the room. The Minister's office was located in a bunker underground, hopefully to avoid the numerous magical raids that threatened to destroy the last fabric of government in the greater United Kingdom.

"The vote's still tied, Minister," thin man said, "It'll have to be your decision."

The vote in question was a vote to send reinforcements for the proposed plan from the wizards. Samson, the intermediary between the two factions, magically appeared near the bunker's location and rushed to the Prime Minister's cabinet to lay out the last ditch plan the wizards created. The wizards, sensing that time was of the essence, didn't have the decency to allow the cabinet to discuss the various pros and cons of their stratagem. Thus, in the eleventh hour, the final decision fell upon the beleaguered Muggle Prime Minister.

"What kind of units do we have ready?"

"Fast-moving choppers, various fighters and bombers can be en route immediately. Ground forces will take a bit longer to mobilize. Frankly, their proposed timeline only allows scattered reinforcements from our main army. The bulk of our help will come from assisting their entry into London."

"Mobilize the ground forces anyways and have them on standby."

"Yes, sir."

"What are the estimated loss of our forces should we send them reinforcements?"

"According to the statisticians, north of 95%."

The Muggle Minister exhaled loudly, expecting the answer. He ducked his head, the creases cracking and deepening on his forehead. Less than a year beforehand, the Minister was simply in the staging process of his re-election campaign. Instead, he was forced to make the decision regarding the majority of his military forces based upon a plan that had a miniscule chance to succeed from his Muggle point of view. There were few options left.

Scribbling a small word on a piece of paper, the Minister handed it to the thin man and motioned with his head, indicating he had written his answer. The thin man took the scrap of paper and scampered out of the room, leaving the Muggle Prime Minister to his own thoughts.

"There!" Harry pointed out the black dot racing towards the train, no doubt some form of Death Eater patrol investigating the train.

"Volley on the ready," Harry commanded, taking aim as well.

On his mark, the unit fired a range of Stunners designed to create a web-like sphere around the patrol so it almost guaranteed a hit. At the same time, Harry mustered the strongest Summoning charm he could create, hoping to reel in the Death Eater. Even from a distance, Harry could see the Death Eater slump as one of the Stunners hit

him. The body grew closer and closer, the black dot hurtling towards him until it started taking on a distinguishable shape.

"Malfoy, Cushioning Charm!" Harry yelled, too busy with his Accio to focus on another spell at the moment.

Just as the body was about to collide into the side of the train, Malfoy timed his Cushioning Charm so the Death Eater simply bounced against the metal paneling with a little clang. Seamus and Dean hauled him through the window and threw him unceremoniously on the ground.

"Quick, veritaserum," Harry snapped his fingers.

Padma immediately procured a small vial of clear liquid and placed it in Harry's hand. Wrenching off the mask of the unknown Death Eater, Harry first noted that he didn't recognize the man then wrenched open his jaw and placed a few drops on his tongue. He shut the man's jaw and plugged his noise, the body doing the rest of the work for him. Sputtering to life, the Death Eater looked around, his eyes glassed over from the potion.

"How many of you were sent here?" Harry began the interrogation.

"Just me," the Death Eater replied monotonously.

"Have you reported anything? How did you spot the train?"

"No. A watcher spotted the train from a distance and relayed it in. I was sent to investigate the potential threat."

"Are there any blockades in place to stop the train from reaching King's Cross?"

"None."

"Will there be more patrols?"

"Possibly."

"Do you know how to get into the tower?"

"No."

Harry stood up from his kneeling position next to the Death Eater. He looked around, visibly asking if there were any more useful questions he could ask. Malfoy leaned down, his mask nearly touching the other man's cheek.

"Where is Bates?"

"In London."

Harry eyed Malfoy wearily, not willing to deal with the other boy's streak of vengeance right now. Harry Stunned the Death Eater before he could say another word, satisfied with the information received from him.

"They'll sent out another feeler once they notice he doesn't report. Once we're visible from the tower, they'll bring everything," Harry snapped the Death Eater's wand and took a quick look at him.

"And what about him?" Seamus asked.

Harry's face was blank as he made his decision. Picking the Death Eater up by the collar of his robe, he dragged him to the window and unceremoniously threw him out. The dull sound of his body hitting the ground was drowned out by the merciless roar of the train.

"He'll be harmless without his wand."

"He'll be harmless dead, too," Seamus added with raised eyebrows.

Harry didn't reply and instead turned around in the direction of the front of the train. As he departed, he left one last order, "Get everyone ready."

As Harry left the compartment, Padma whirled around to the rest of the unit with her hands in the air, "Did Harry really just throw that Death Eater overboard?"

Malfoy chuckled, "At least he didn't kill him on the spot."

"Technically, that would be a bit more humane," Su Li mused.

"Potter doesn't use the AK," Malfoy said dismissively as he tightened his equipment belt of potions.

"Why not?" Michael asked for the rest of them.

Malfoy stopped fidgeting with his belt and looked at them. It was unnerving to the rest of the unit, not being able to see someone's facial features. But Malfoy revealed surprise in his eyes as he looked curiously at each of them.

"Do none of you know?" Malfoy asked them.

"I saw him use it against Bates, but that was the only time I've ever seen him use it."

"That's because Bates is a special exception," Malfoy explained, "But - really - none of you know?"

"None of us Malfoy," Seamus repeated pedantically, "Get off your high horse and tell us why he doesn't use the AK if you know."

"Not really my place to say," Malfoy continued to toy with them.

"Malfoy!"

Chuckling amusedly to himself one more time, Malfoy simply shrugged, "He's paranoid about it. I remember when we took our first prisoners, he specifically instructed me not to kill with the AK."

"So you do kill the prisoners?" Padma said with an ashen face.

"What did you think we did?" Malfoy snapped in response, "Potter, for once, was doing the right thing."

Seamus, along with the rest of the unit, didn't seem at all surprised. They've experienced their fair share of killing along the line but none of them had ever killed a defenseless prisoner. Padma and Michael were the only ones who looked a bit green at Malfoy's admission.

Sensing that the rest of the unit was waiting for him to talk, Malfoy sighed exasperatedly, "Scores of Death Eaters are about to descend upon this train and try force it off it's rails. Let me know

when you have time to sit a Death Eater down and explain to him where he'll be staying prisoner for the rest of the trip."

Malfoy made a disgusted noise from the back of his throat as he exited, leaving the rest of the unit to ponder his words. Seamus and Dean looked at each other and shrugged.

"No sense dwelling over this," Seamus muttered, "Bigger stuff we have to worry about."

"Much bigger stuff..." Su Li trailed off, looking into the distance.

Seamus turned around and leaned forward so he could see underneath the shade that was drawn. In the distance, a giant, shadowy structure grew taller and taller as the train hurtled along the tracks. It started out as a small blot against the horizon, but it growing into a more distinguishable shape with each passing second.

"Hello, beautiful," Seamus whispered to himself.

"Godric?"

"Yes, Rowena?"

A tall, imposing man with a brilliant, red beard turned around to face a raven-haired woman. She walked up to him until they were standing side by side, both looking at the same object.

"Is it almost complete?"

Godric nodded, "The elves have some more finishing to do but once they've completed their work, all that's left is to bind our magic with the celestial arrangements in the sky. With such strong powers, I believe the marvel will exceed even my own expectations."

Rowena nodded thoughtfully, a pondering look remaining in her eyes, "Perhaps you are right after all."

"Perhaps," Godric answered neutrally but the smile on his face belied a different emotion, "I should thank you. You were the only one who could convince Salazar after all."

"A decision that I've yet to fully agree upon," a third voice drawled.

Godric snorted, not bothering to turn around, "Salazar, it is important that we unite the magical and Muggle world. We must share our responsibilities with the rest of the world! They are not for ours to keep."

"These gifts are given to a precious few of us for us to keep. Sharing would be unwise. I do not come as a beggar, but I implore you to keep these talents to ourselves."

"To keep these talents to ourselves would be selfish."

"You are being selfish," Salazar hissed, standing on the other side of Rowena, using her as a buffer, "You want to share your gifts with the world and have them love you and cherish you, but you overestimate the kindness of mankind."

"I estimate them correctly."

"You do not," Salazar insisted, "They are greedy. They want what they can't have and they will never be able to have magic. It will turn them mad. Surely you can see this!"

"We can share our magic," Godric reasoned, his voice never rising.

"We can?" Rowena raised an eyebrow at this allowance.

"And how do you wish to share your magic, Godric?" Salazar asked sarcastically.

"Not I. We."

"I still don't follow, Godric," Rowena frowned.

"What better way is there to show the Muggles that they are capable of great things than by granting them what they want? Let them have their deepest desire!"

"A lunacy not even Helga could overtake," Salazar muttered.

"That is dangerous, Godric," Rowena was more even-keeled than her other compatriot, "We can't simply grant every Muggle their

truest desires. Not only would it require enormous endeavor on our part, but men should not be allowed to freely wish upon such things."

"Of course," Godric frowned, not liking the resistance by his two fellow friends, "Only a man worthy enough would be allowed their greatest desire. This is why I need your help. Including Helga."

"Can't you see?" Godric turned to them, his hands out and pleading, "Bringing together the magical world and the Muggle world would foster a new era of cooperation and achievement. Think of what we could create! Think of the joy we could bring to Muggles!"

"You are a fool, Godric. A fool if you don't realize that men will not be so eager to accept such dominance over their own."

"The tower makes them amenable to magic, Salazar! We've made it so. It will become the central hub of magical-Muggle cooperation. It is the key to ushering in a revolution in both worlds."

Salazar continued to shake his head, disappointed at the lust for power Godric couldn't seem to satiate.

"Isn't Hogwarts enough? Can't we just build from there?" Salazar pleaded.

"A school for just magical children?" Godric scoffed, "No. We must reach out to everyone. We must let the whole world know of magic."

Rowena didn't answer, weighing both options inside her head. She couldn't deny the possibilities of a magical-Muggle world in terms of innovation and advancement. She was often a proponent of mixing and blending the two different sides in an effort to continue finding new spells and conjunctions. Yet, she could understand Salazar's reluctance. If they could not help the Muggles understand quickly enough, it could quickly turn into a different type of revolution than what Godric envisioned.

"Are you sure we will be able to placate the Muggles? An anarchy or anti-magic movement could easily start in the tower's place," Rowena felt obliged to ask.



"Yes," Godric said, almost impatiently, "The power from the planets in conjunction with our very own is more than enough to create an environment worthy of fostering such a connection. But we need the mirror to convince those that we are not simply subjugating them to ruin. We need this mirror to show them what they are capable of greatness with or without magic!"

Rowena sighed, sensing that Godric was not to be dissuaded from the idea of this tower. Salazar looked pointedly down, shaking his head.

"I can't do this alone," Godric implored them, "I need all of your help to create this mirror."

Rowena was silent for a moment but gave the slightest of nods. Salazar continued to shake his head as he looked at the object in the distance.

"You had to have a new project, Godric. You had to include yourself into more and more things until the magical world was not enough for you," Salazar lectured, "And here we are, on the brink of introducing magic to a completely anarchic body of men. You will rue the day you built this tower, Godric."

"But will you help?" Godric growled, his hand twitching to his wand.

Salazar huffed, "Don't bother reaching for your wand. I will help you with this mirror, but once I do, I will withdraw myself from participating in Hogwarts. You have bastardized magic, Godric. You have ruined it all."

"And you are too narrow-minded to see the potential capabilities of my vision. Together, we can bring a new generation of peace and prosperity and stop the bloodshed and famine that so tinges this land with red. We can do this, yet you stand there and say that you want to keep this world self-contained. You want the rest of the world to rot away. I can't let this happen."

"Or maybe the Muggles will fix themselves. We always have."

"But they would do better with us."

Salazar stopped, knowing any further argument was futile. Godric was always strong-headed and stubborn and his sudden lust for power and involvement did nothing to curb his enthusiasm.

"Okay, Godric. I will help you create this mirror."

Godric nodded, "Thank you."

He turned around and the three of them looked at the almost completed structure of an ivory tower, sitting bright against the daylight.

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